

King of the Labyrinth, Vol. 1

Shien BIS

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KING of the **LABYRINTH** — Cry of the Minotaur

SHIEN BIS



New York

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Chapter 1

The Unique Monster

1

On the tenth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth, in the space known to humans as a boss room, a minotaur yawned into existence.

It was a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man, and it bore an ax in each hand.

Its horned head swayed back and forth, its eyes opening slowly as they adjusted to the light.

The space was dim in comparison to the world outside the labyrinth, but it was still a bit too bright for the minotaur, who had spawned mere moments ago.

A certain scent crept into its nostrils. The minotaur was overcome with an immediate sense of longing, confident that whatever the scent led to would slake its fervent desire.

It peered into the depths of the cave, and there, it beheld a small lake.

Being a monster, it knew nothing of the word *lake*. Its instincts told it, though, that this was what its body was seeking.

The minotaur charged toward the water.

It fell to its knees and gazed upon the lake's surface, studying its reflection.

The damp, refreshing air further inspired its thirst.

The minotaur then plunged its entire head into the lake and gulped down large mouthfuls of water. The liquid coursed throughout its parched body, hydrating its cells and filling it with strength.

It lifted its head, sending up a spray in the process.

It then sucked in a deep breath and exhaled, blowing a slight gust across the dim cavern.

It lowered its head to the lake and drank some more.

This cycle of drinking and gasping for air was repeated three times.

At last, its thirst was quenched.

This, however, did not fully satisfy the minotaur. Having addressed one need, a new craving immediately bubbled to the surface.

Humans knew this sensation as “hunger.”

The minotaur’s entire body was racked with the feeling.

It stood and turned away from the lake.

The creature was enormous in stature. All monsters of the labyrinth were born into the world fully grown.

It didn’t take long for the minotaur to spot the cave’s entrance.

Perhaps there would be something in that direction capable of satisfying this new craving.

It lumbered toward the mouth of the cave, but when it tried to pass through, it was overtaken by a strong sense of discomfort.

Its footsteps ceased.

Despite its best efforts, the minotaur was unable to take another step forward.

It could go no farther than this point. This was the first lesson its body would teach it.

But if it could not leave the cave, then how would it sate its hunger?

The minotaur paced around the boss room.

It walked and walked and walked, but its hunger would not fade. In truth, the feeling grew only more intense with each passing second.

The minotaur groaned and thrashed its head, saliva flying from its mouth, before returning to the lake and sitting down by the water. It hoped that the site of its first drink would provide succor for this new irritation.

The maddening hunger and the pain in its stomach would not relent, though. It was torture.

And the minotaur hated it.

The minotaur hated the world that had given birth to it, and it hated itself for being so enfeebled by its desire.

2

Monster was not a scientific term that referred to any type of creature in particular. It was simply a label humans used to refer to creatures they viewed as threatening.

Strictly speaking, there was no clear distinction between what made a creature an animal or a monster.

No one would call a rabbit a monster, but jackalopes—creatures that resembled rabbits with antlers—were seen as such. Even so, both could be eaten, and there was not much of a biological difference between the two. What set jackalopes apart was their odd penchant for aggression toward humans. For people who lacked combat prowess, a brush with one could even turn deadly. This detail

solidified their monster status.

Creatures that humans didn't understand—or creatures that were ominous or frightening—were also referred to as monsters.

There were other beings that earned the “monster” tag that would never be considered animals, such as ogres, orcs, goblins, and kobolds. It was undeniable, however, that they were living creatures. There were even many cases where these beings would build their own peaceful spheres of community far from the presence of humans.

In contrast, there also were monsters that could not be considered living, such as ghost- and demon-type monsters.

These types of monsters did not grow larger as they aged and were incapable of producing offspring. No matter where they appeared, they brought pain, death, and disaster to humans.

There were legends that spoke of the origins of ghosts and demons. The stories often connected them to some malevolent deity. These monsters, typically, were extremely repulsive and inflicted harm on people by attacking them with magic or curses. Many could also use a host of deadly poisons.

But what about monsters that appeared in labyrinths?

Ogres, orcs, goblins, and kobolds could all be found in labyrinths, but these were not born of a mother's womb. They were spawned from the walls themselves.

After they were killed, they would respawn sometime later, but their replacements would be wholly different individuals, with none of the memories or experiences of their predecessors.

Monsters in labyrinths were born fully grown and did not change or evolve. They did not have sexes or genders, and they could not mate or produce offspring.

This was why monsters in labyrinths could not be considered living beings and were often called “magical creatures” or “cryptids.”

In the labyrinth, the types of monsters that spawned on each floor never changed. This was true for the monster in the boss room as well.

A minotaur spawning in the tenth-floor boss room of the Sazardon Labyrinth meant that the previous boss had also been a minotaur. It had been killed by a human.

Humans explored the labyrinth to kill monsters. When they did so successfully, they received money, weapons, potions, and more. The weapons that could be obtained from monsters in labyrinths were far superior to anything one could procure outside and were sometimes made of rare and expensive materials.

Labyrinths were often bursting with treasure. That was why humans regularly ventured inside to explore and slay monsters.

Sometimes people died in battle, but the promise of unparalleled wealth often motivated them far more than the fear of death deterred

them.

Doing battle with monsters in labyrinths also helped people grow stronger at an accelerated rate. In turn, becoming stronger enabled them to fight monsters on even deeper floors. Triumphant in battle against the monsters at lower levels rewarded them with even greater wealth and experience.

For the sake of growing stronger... For the sake of growing richer... On this day, too, humans would boldly step foot into the Sazardon Labyrinth.

3

Erina was a female adventurer.

A year ago, in the town of Micaene, Erina had visited a temple and made an oath to the earth goddess Bora. She had received the holy occupation of adventurer and was given an adventurer medal to match.

The holy occupations of knight and thief also allowed one to explore labyrinths. Adventurers, though, could obtain the Map skill, and they experienced faster growth within labyrinths compared to other classes. The magical storage system to which they gained access, commonly referred to as a Bag, was also appealing.

Making an oath to the earth goddess was common practice for anyone who used a sword, like Erina. Receiving your holy occupation from the goddess Bora granted you divine protection that slightly raised your physical attack and defense. It also increased the amount of health you were able to recover.

“Well, if it isn’t Erina.”

“Oh, hey, Logis.”

“Are you going in alone today?”

“Yeah. I left my party.”

“You did, huh? Well, at any rate, you sure polished that leather armor to a brilliant shine.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck in there.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Four days ago, Erina had left her adventuring party.

They were nice people to be around, but they lacked ambition. They had no desire to delve into the deeper floors of the labyrinth anytime soon.

Erina wanted to become an adventurer so she could make more money. She needed every coin she could get her hands on in order to

buy back her family's farm. If she could accomplish that goal, then her father's health would improve, and her mother's smile would return.

This was a special day for Erina. This was the day she would become a C-rank adventurer.

There were multiple ways to earn rank C.

The first was to raise your level to 21. Once an adventurer reached level 21, they could then increase their rank to C by returning to the Adventurers Guild and receiving a prayer from someone with the Oath skill.

You could also increase your rank through the simple accumulation of achievements, regardless of your level. However, it was said that the achievements required to reach rank C were quite difficult, and not even the Adventurers Guild was sure what kind of jobs you needed to complete. For that reason, raising your rank by amassing achievements was imprecise and time-consuming.

However, there was a special way of reaching rank C in the town of Micaene.

That method was to defeat the boss of the tenth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth, the minotaur, by yourself.

Normally, the boss of a floor had strength on par with the monsters two floors below it. For example, the boss of the fifth floor would be as strong as the monsters that roamed the seventh.

The minotaur, however, was stronger than the monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth floors, despite being the boss of the tenth. And disappointingly, you got very little experience for defeating it. Occasionally, a blessed bastard sword of moderate worth would drop, but the probability was very low. To make matters worse, the bosses from the eleventh floor onward would sometimes award skill drops upon defeating them, but the minotaur did not. The reward for killing the minotaur was simply disproportionate to the difficulty of the fight.

No one knows who discovered the rule that defeating the minotaur in a solo battle allowed you to be promoted to C rank or when this had first occurred. Nevertheless, it worked without exception upon receiving the oath, so Erina was thankful for it.

Though she had stable work as a guard, becoming a C-rank adventurer was still a far more lucrative option. There were some missions that could be accepted only by people C rank or higher. If feeding yourself was your only concern, then D or E rank was sufficient, but in order to make enough money to have any sort of savings, you needed to be at least rank C.

Erina put her right hand to her left breast.

Her leather armor was shiny from being polished with oil for half a day. A charm was sewn into the breastplate on the left side. It was the earth goddess Bora's charm, imbued with a blessing of safety.

Next, she checked her belt.

The pouches on it contained two yellow potions, five red potions, and one blue potion. The yellow potions had not been cheap, but Erina would need them for the fight against the minotaur.

The minotaur was a difficult opponent, but Erina was aware of its abilities and fighting style. A veteran adventurer had told her all about the fight after she treated him to a beer. As long as you remained calm, victory against the minotaur was possible.

Defeating the minotaur in a solo battle might have become a qualification for C rank because it tested your ability to draw intel from more experienced adventurers. You could pay to obtain some information at the guild, but that would not have been nearly as detailed as the data she'd received from the adventurer. At Erina's level, the minotaur was not an opponent she could defeat without thorough advance knowledge of the fight.

4

Erina stepped into the Sazardon Labyrinth.

For some reason, entering it gave her a strange sense of ease. That was probably due to her adventurer designation.

Some jobs, including knights, adventurers, and thieves, could receive a variety of benefits when they entered the labyrinth.

The most useful of these was potions.

Red potions recovered your stamina and healed injuries. They even possessed the incredible ability to regenerate lost body parts.

Blue potions restored spirit power, which was needed to use magic and activate skills.

Yellow potions healed paralysis, petrification, and other status effects.

Green potions cured poisoning.

For the most part, the powerful blessings of these potions did not manifest outside the labyrinth. Potions could be found only in labyrinths and were ineffective elsewhere.

That rule applied to more than just potions. Many of the powerful weapons and armor obtained in the labyrinth increased your attack or defense, enhanced your physical abilities, or gave a variety of other effects. These effects were called blessings, named for the grace of the gods. Blessings typically worked only within labyrinths. Occasionally, word got around about a weapon or piece of armor with a blessing that functioned in the outside world, but that was very rare. Items such as those were incredibly valuable.

Erina's footfalls were light as she sped through the stone corridors. The physical abilities of adventurers were slightly enhanced when they entered a labyrinth, and she was making use of that.

I can do it.

I can do it.

I can defeat the minotaur!

Erina had heard that the holy occupation of adventurer hadn't existed for very long. The adventurer designation didn't have as storied a history in comparison to jobs like knights, merchants, or woodcutters.

She had also heard that this land had existed for many years before someone discovered the phenomenon of levels.

She couldn't imagine a world without adventurers, and it was even more difficult to believe that there had ever been a time when people were unaware of levels. Because neither of those was ever going away, the world of the past was totally irrelevant to her.

Erina utilized the power of the blessings to increase her true strength. She'd steadily saved up money and purchased a high-quality sword, then trained hard to become proficient with it.

There was no way she would lose to monsters that knew nothing but brute force.

In that, Erina had full confidence.

5

Erina was able to breeze through the first five floors without fighting anything at all.

The monsters of the labyrinth tended to flee from opponents significantly stronger than they were, so the inhabitants of the first five floors didn't approach her.

She had to deal with a few fights on floors six through eight, but she defeated the monsters without issue. She suffered a few scratches but no injuries. The monsters dropped some bronze coins and one red potion.

She thought about putting the red potion into her Bag. Instead, she placed it in a pouch on her belt so she could quickly access it in case of emergency.

She rested on the staircase leading down to her penultimate destination and ate a meal she had prepared beforehand.

Then, it was time to finally take on the ninth floor.

The monsters on this floor were orcs. These were hideous creatures that had an appearance somewhere between man and beast. Supreme

strength and resilience were trademarks of this race.

Orcs were no match for Erina in a one-on-one fight. However, they had a habit of roaming in packs of two or three, which could make this floor tricky. Fighting two at once was difficult, and fighting three simultaneously was something she definitely wanted to avoid.

Luckily, orcs were slow runners. Erina planned to take advantage of that and speed through the floor without the need to fight. She knew the path to the tenth floor very well.

Just as she hoped, she was successfully able to sprint through the orcs without engaging. She didn't have much longer to go until she reached the tenth-floor staircase.

She then nearly crashed into an orc she had failed to notice.

Shoot.

Erina dashed forward, cut a light gash into the orc's arm—which held a simple club—and then ran around it.

She could feel the orc chasing her, but if she could just reach the tenth-floor staircase, she would be safe.

The monsters could not perceive the staircases. That meant the monsters of the ninth floor were incapable of descending to the tenth or rising to the eighth.

Wha—?

Oh, come on!

Right in front of the staircase she was about to fling herself down, a party of three adventurers was fighting a lone orc.

She briefly considered ducking around them to get to her destination.

If she did that, though, the orc chasing her would end up joining the fight against the adventurers. If that kind of thing was reported to the guild, Erina's career would go up in flames.

Shit!

Erina stomped her feet on the hard stone floor of the labyrinth, sharply about-faced, and raised her sword aloft. She then dashed toward the orc and swung her blade down.

The orc's right hand was sent flying, cut clean from the arm.

But that did nothing to slow its advance.

She dodged nimbly to the left but couldn't avoid the orc's large body entirely, and her right leg collided with the orc's right leg.

Losing her balance, Erina felt her left shoulder crash into the stone wall. The orc also seemed to have fallen. She had no time to think about her pain. Orcs had a very dull sense of pain and could easily ignore grievous wounds in a fight.

Feeling slightly dizzy, she turned around to face her enemy just before it flung itself at her.

Erina didn't panic. She was accustomed to fighting orcs and felt no

fear looking at their hideous faces.

Her sword plunged into the monster's throat.

Even then, it continued to charge at her.

The orc's rampage served only to push the blade deeper, and the beast soon stopped moving altogether. The light left its eyes.

Five bronze coins clinked as they fell to the ground. The orc had vanished from existence.

"Phew..."

She leaned her back against the stone wall and caught her breath, then peered deeper into the corridor. The party of three had just finished off their orc.

Erina picked up the five bronze coins, retrieved the red potion from her belt, and downed it.

Her unsteady vision stabilized, and the pain in her shoulder faded.

The three adventurers looked toward Erina. She knew one of them.

"Hey, Jansen."

"Erina! Are you by yourself this time?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna go on ahead."

"Oh, wow. You're actually doing it?"

Erina came to a stop after walking past them and turned to face Jansen. She gave a slight nod and then descended the staircase to the tenth floor.

6

The monsters of the tenth floor were gray wolves.

The items they could potentially drop were of decent quality: silver coins, red potions, and even blue potions. They also had a rare chance of dropping yellow potions.

Yet, in spite of that, this floor was not well-liked.

A one-on-one fight with a gray wolf had an appropriate difficulty for the tenth floor. Because they moved through the corridors quickly, though, and because they could hear and smell opponents from far away, you could easily find yourself surrounded if you took too long dealing with one. The gray wolves were also much more efficient when acting as a pack, so facing several at a time heightened their threat significantly.

For these reasons, many adventurers tried to avoid combat while making their way through this floor.

There were two types of items you could use to skip this floor, and both were popular products at the guild.

The first was dummy bait. It was just synthetic meat imbued with a

scent, but the wolves loved it. Throwing the artificial bait distracted the wolves, allowing you to head down a different corridor.

Real meat wasn't as effective because the wolves would gobble it up in one bite and get right back to chasing you. Poisoned meat didn't work, either, because the wolves were good at sniffing out poison. They would simply ignore it and attack you instead. Even the dummy bait wasn't perfect—the wolves would still attack you if you got near them, so this method was nothing more than a momentary distraction.

The other product people used was a scent pouch. These released a smell that the gray wolves hated, which caused them to keep their distance from you. It didn't work as reliably as dummy bait, but at the very least, it greatly reduced the chance of finding yourself cornered by wolves. It was a popular choice for people who wanted to pass through the floor with minimal hassle.

Erina was one such person, and she had a pouch with her.

However, she ended up being unusually lucky—she reached the boss room without encountering a single gray wolf.

I made it.

It's almost time.

All right, stay calm.

I just need to stay calm.

One could see the area outside the boss room while inside, but the opposite was impossible. You couldn't hear anything while outside, either. The boss room was an isolated space.

Erina gathered her breath, readied herself, and strode confidently to the site of her long-awaited battle.

7

The room was much more spacious than she had anticipated.

This was Erina's first time in the tenth-floor boss room, and even though she had heard about it, seeing its width and height for herself made her breath catch in her throat.

It should have been impossible for the boss room's ceiling to be so high, considering the distance she'd descended from the ninth floor to the tenth. Once she passed through the entrance to the room, Erina had entered a distorted space.

The minotaur...isn't here?

Oh, it was.

It was sitting on the bank of a lake located farther into the room, but with its back turned to Erina, it looked like a giant boulder.

The boulder stood up and turned around.

It's huge!

Is it a unique monster?!

The species of monster that appeared in each boss room was always the same, and their strength was always the same, too.

But the individual monsters did have slight variations.

They could be marginally taller or shorter, and their color could be darker or lighter.

If you were to closely measure them, some would probably have ended up being a touch faster or stronger than others.

But those differences were usually small enough to ignore.

In rare cases, though, an extremely strong individual would spawn. That would make for a difficult fight, and should the adventurer win, they would make a name for themselves at the guild. These oddities were called "unique monsters," and they had a high probability of dropping rare items. For that reason, when word would get around that a unique monster had spawned, adventurers would go rushing to fight it.

Erina could still turn back.

If she was to step away into the corridor, the minotaur wouldn't be able to follow her. Boss monsters could not leave the boss room.

Why am I being so timid?!

I can't chicken out now!

Erina clenched her teeth and braced herself, fixing her eyes on the minotaur.

Upon noticing her, the creature charged toward Erina.

RAAAAAAAGGGGHHHH!

Erina let out a beast-like war cry and ran toward the minotaur herself.

She was immediately taken by the exhilaration of battle, all her fear disappearing in an instant.

I'll kill it!

I'll slay the monster and finally get what I've been working so hard for!

The minotaur wielded a short ax in each hand. It hefted the one in its right overhead.

Okay!

Looks like my info was right!

She had heard the minotaur was right-handed, and in most cases, it attacked with its right hand first.

Erina slowed her advance.

Right now, Erina's sole focus was the minotaur's right hand.

The minotaur's first move was always an attack with an ax. As long as you paid attention to its right arm, the attack was avoidable.

Erina decelerated even more and drew her sword. She gripped the handle with both hands, lifted the weapon forcefully over her right

shoulder, and used that same force to bring it down.

The minotaur swiped at her with its ax in the same moment. Erina's blade landed a cut near the minotaur's right wrist, and then she jumped to the left.

The severe blow to its hand didn't weaken the force of the minotaur's swing at all. While letting out a deep moan, it swung its ax through the space where Erina's head had just been.

The sheer strength of the attack sent a chill up Erina's spine.

If it can't hit me, that power means nothing!

With the minotaur's arm stretched out after swinging and missing, Erina brought her sword down on its elbow.

With an irritated growl, the minotaur lifted the ax in its left hand.

So it's the left hand this time, huh?

All right. Come at me!

This time, she dodged to the right, then struck a blow at the minotaur's left arm.

The minotaur drew back its elbow before thrusting its right arm, ax and all, at Erina.

She dodged to the left and took the opportunity to swipe at its outstretched right arm.

Stay calm!

Just stay calm!

It's strong, but its attacks are really simple.

I can dodge them all if I pay close attention.

The minotaur bellowed in frustration, took a deep breath, and lurched backward. It then tossed its head forward and charged with its two horns pointed at Erina.

She safely jumped out of the way. The minotaur turned slowly, and Erina glared at it coldly.

All it can do is swing and thrust its axes or charge at me with its horns.

I'll just keep dodging its attacks and slashing at its arms until it can't wield its axes anymore.

The minotaur continued flailing its axes and not much else.

As Erina dodged from side to side, she started gaining more and more leeway to attack.

The ground beneath her feet was a little uneven, which made movement a bit difficult and occasionally almost got her hit by an ax.

Now and then, fragments of stone kicked up by the minotaur's feet struck her through gaps in her armor.

But none of the minotaur's direct attacks connected.

Their offensive and defensive trades continued for a while longer.

Erina was dripping sweat, and her breath was heavy, but she hadn't been injured.

The minotaur's arms were shredded and bloody.

If you just stayed calm and watched carefully, you'd realize how unsophisticated the minotaur's attacks were.

Its swipes were quick, but its windup was slow, making it easy to predict the trajectory of its weapons.

It was sluggish transitioning from one movement to the next, and its gait was awkward.

Now that Erina was looking at the minotaur with a cool head, she realized it was only a little bit taller than she was. Her nervousness and fear when she'd first seen it had probably created the impression that it was taller than it really was.

This was no unique monster. It was just an ordinary minotaur.

She dodged a lunge from her opponent and ended up in perfect position for an attack.

Now!

Erina swung her sword with all her might for a weighty slash attack. It sang through the air.

On impact, there was the unsettling noise of bone being severed. The minotaur's left hand was sent flying through the air, still holding its ax.

I win!

But her celebration was premature. She had let her guard down.

The monster swung its now-handless left arm at her, hitting her hard in the chest and sending her crashing into the stone wall behind her.

The minotaur lifted the ax in its right hand.

Erina shook her head to get her bearings, then kicked off the wall and jumped out of the way.

Hearing the sound of stone being smashed to bits by the ax behind her, Erina ran forward ten steps, pivoted to face the minotaur, and took a moment to catch her breath.

Here it comes!

She reached for the belt at her waist and attempted to pull out a potion.

She was going to drink a yellow potion to cure her abnormal status.

But she was having trouble grabbing it.

She looked down at her belt. The pouch was broken.

All her potion bottles had shattered when she was thrown into the wall.

GROAAAAAARRRRRR!!

The minotaur let out a tremendous roar.

The whole cave shook.

Erina lost all courage to face her enemy and was awash with a

feeling of hopelessness.

This was Warcry.

Warcry was a special attack minotaurs possessed. It sacrificed a third of the user's remaining stamina to inhibit their opponent's movements for a limited amount of time.

The minotaur swung its right ax.

She tried to jump out of the way, but her fear prevented her from dodging the attack completely. Erina was slashed across her chest.

Realizing she no longer had any chance of winning, she started to flee.

"The minotaur is a slow runner."

"If you run as fast as you can, it won't be able to catch you when you try to escape."

She recalled the veteran adventurer's words.

Her sword felt heavy in her right hand.

Had it always been this heavy?

She thought about dropping it but quickly decided against that.

If she lost this sword here, she'd have no choice but to quit being an adventurer.

The sword was the one thing she couldn't lose.

The minotaur was chasing her.

It was closing in.

Erina ran, fighting desperately for her life.

When she was just a few seconds from the entrance, though, she tripped over her own feet and stumbled.

The minotaur roared, and she felt a gust of wind against her back.

A sharp pain flared up in her left ankle, but she ignored it. Rolling like a barrel, she managed to tumble through the entrance and out of the boss room.

Panting heavily, she looked down at her left leg to see that her foot was gone. It had been severed by the minotaur's ax.

Erina produced a thin rope from her Bag and tied it tightly around her leg to stop the bleeding.

She was in the labyrinth. If someone passed by, she could ask for a red potion, which would not only save her life but also regenerate her lost foot.

For now, her life was not in danger.

It was then that Erina noticed the tears falling from her eyes. They weren't because of the pain, though. She was just grateful to be alive.

The moment that creature entered the room, the minotaur learned it was not alone in the world.

When it turned to face the intruder, it felt a violent sense of hatred.

No, *hatred* was not the right way to describe that feeling.

If you had to encapsulate what the minotaur felt toward the female adventurer in a word, *hostility* would probably be most fitting.

Its hunger intensified.

But this was slightly different from the hunger it had felt earlier.

A different sort of craving.

A craving for victory in battle.

The minotaur's instincts were ordering it to do everything in its power to destroy its enemy.

The creature was slightly shorter than itself.

Nevertheless, it was projecting clear animosity toward the minotaur.

The minotaur let that aggression wash over it, feeling a twinge of excitement at this chance to act on its destructive impulses.

Building up power in its right arm, the minotaur raised its ax.

It hadn't even realized it was holding an ax until that moment.

And not just in its right hand but in its left as well.

It had no idea how long it had been holding them. Probably from the moment it was born.

The axes felt comfortable in its grip, and it liked them because they made its attacks deadlier.

The minotaur swung the reliable weapon in its right hand down at the approaching enemy.

The fragile interloper should have been crushed from the force of that blow.

But the attack missed.

Next, it swung the ax in its left hand.

That also missed.

It swung its weapons over and over again.

It missed every single time.

Not only could it not land a hit, but the frail enemy was landing weak nicks on its arms.

The individual cuts did not hurt.

The pain came gradually, though, as the lacerations on its arms accumulated.

That negative feeling intensified.

The minotaur's frustration was growing.

It tried charging the creature with its horns multiple times.

The enemy dodged each of those attacks as well.

Its arms were being torn to ribbons by the enemy's sword.

It put extra force behind its next blow in an attempt to crush its enemy once and for all, but this strike, too, failed to connect.

The enemy then cut off the minotaur's left hand.

After that, the adversary stopped moving.

The minotaur swung at the enemy with its left stump, landing its first direct hit.

The intruder was blown backward and crashed into a stone wall.

The minotaur followed up by swinging the ax in its remaining hand, but the enemy just barely dodged it, and the blade ended up slicing air before taking a chunk out of the wall.

The enemy ran to put some distance between the two of them.

At that moment, the minotaur's instincts took the reins.

It inhaled deeply, thrashed its head about, and activated the skill that humans knew as Warcry.

The minotaur's skill caught the enemy, weakening and overwhelming it with fear.

Swinging its ax, the minotaur hoped for a finishing blow, but its prey had turned its back on the battle and was trying to escape.

Anger welled up within the minotaur.

It immediately gave chase.

Soon.

Soon it would catch its enemy.

Soon it would kill its enemy.

The creature stumbled.

The minotaur lifted the ax in its right hand and brought it down hard.

That swing connected and carved off a piece of the intruder's body.

Just as the minotaur was about to finish it off with its next blow, the enemy escaped through the cave entrance.

The minotaur had no choice but to leave it at that.

9

On the other side of the entryway the minotaur could not traverse, the fragile enemy was lying facedown on the ground.

Eventually, it began treating itself.

The minotaur wanted to kill.

It wanted to kill this creature.

But it could not cross the threshold.

Just as a fish cannot swim through the air or a bird cannot fly beyond the atmosphere, a boss monster is incapable of leaving its boss room.

That did nothing to abate its desire to kill, though. Its hunger only grew stronger and stronger. The massive minotaur was in a rage,

wanting more than anything to settle this fight.

For that reason, it had to advance.

It had to pass through the entrance and into the corridor.

With its every bodily instinct pushing back against the step it was trying to take, the minotaur persevered and eventually managed to force its right foot through the threshold and out of the room.

Its foot sizzled, burning hideously.

The pain and shock caused it to drop its ax, but the minotaur did not stop trying.

It pushed its right hand through, which also sizzled and bubbled as it burned.

Its shoulders, head, chest, and legs all seared as it forced itself through the entrance.

Its face was horrifically distorted; saliva poured from its mouth, but it never stopped pushing.

Its eyes were scorched as well, rendering it virtually blind.

Had the minotaur had been able to see, it surely would have noted the female warrior's face plastered in horror, incapable of anything more than shaking her head from side to side as she gawked at the demonic figure traversing the barrier—a feat that should have been impossible.

“No way... There's just no way...”

The minotaur did not understand the language of man. It did, however, grasp that these words were an expression of fear. They also helped it zero in on the location of its target.

Could the minotaur hear the clattering noise? Could it hear the sound of the female adventurer's teeth chattering?

Its face now horribly disfigured and melted from the scalding, it extended its remaining hand toward its prey.

The fist, blackened from carbonization and oozing bodily fluid, opened suddenly and grabbed the female warrior's breastplate.

The minotaur then hoisted her into the air, pivoted its own collapsing body, and slammed her face into the stone wall.

The warrior's head was smashed flat. Skull fragments, blood, and gray matter exploded from the ruined space above her neck.

Her body immediately disappeared.

Only her sword and a variety of items remained.

Her scattered flesh and bone vanished soon after that.

In the labyrinth, even humans faded away after death.

The minotaur fell to the ground, still holding the breastplate in its right hand.

Its body was blackened, shrunk, and emitting a foul-smelling smoke.

This monster's very short life was about to come to an end.

Even then, the minotaur raged in its mind.

More!

Give me more, more fighting!

Give me stronger enemies!

Give me power!

Give me enemies to kill and more power!

These were likely what its thoughts would have been if translated into human speech. It was at once delusional, hateful, and pleading. It was a cry from the bottom of its heart, expressed clearly despite the lack of words.

At that moment, a voice echoed in the minotaur's mind.

Thy plea shall be granted.

The minotaur did not understand the language of man, so of course, it did not understand what that voice had said. However, it knew it was being addressed by a very powerful being.

The earth goddess Bora's charm was embedded into the female warrior's breastplate. The voice the minotaur had heard was the same one that had spoken to the female adventurer when she'd prayed for divine protection in the temple of the earth goddess.

A faint light the color of the earth enveloped the minotaur.

The monster heard the sound of a gentle breeze, and in the blink of an eye, its skin and hair were regenerated. It returned to its original form, even regaining its lost left hand.

Actually, this was not quite its original form. Its body was slightly larger and stronger than it had been before.

This was the phenomenon adventurers knew as a "level-up."

Through the divine protection of the goddess Bora, the experience points the minotaur gained from killing the female adventurer were converted and applied to the minotaur's set growth rates, resulting in a level-up. This event also restored the recipient to full health.

The minotaur returned to the edge of the lake, gulped down some water, and drifted off to sleep.

It was said that the monsters of the labyrinth were born from the stone.

They looked like living creatures, but this was not the case—they were nothing more than pale imitations.

The straightforward proof of that was the fact that they did not grow.

Even if by level-up, the phenomenon of a monster evolving in the

labyrinth was very unusual indeed.

On this day, the Sazardon Labyrinth had birthed a unique monster.

Chapter 2

The Heavenly Blade Percival

1

The same day that a unique monster was born on the tenth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth, a swordsman happened to drop by the Adventurers Guild in the town of Micaene.

“Mr. Logan.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“I see Lord Percival approaching.”

“Really? Bring him in immediately.”

“Understood.”

Logan, the leader of Micaene’s Adventurers Guild, rose to greet his guest. The manager, Eador, invited the swordsman into the room.

“Apologies for intruding.”

“Lord Percival, what a pleasant surprise. Are you going into the labyrinth today?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking of descending about midway through the nineties.”

Logan could have asked how many people Percival was planning on bringing with him for a crazy venture like that, but he knew the answer already.

Percival would be going alone.

This swordsman planned to trek past the ninetieth floor by himself.

“Is that so? Will you be using our transport service?”

“No. Running is the best training of all, so I’ll be going down myself.”

“You’re the same as always, I see. Ah, looks like we have tea. Want a cup?”

“Thank you very much.”

The manager had entered the room accompanied by a young female employee carrying a tray of refreshments. Logan was baffled as to how the manager could have prepared this in such a short time. After the tea was set on the table, the manager and the girl walked back out of the room. The manager closed the poorly fitted door without a sound

on the way out.

Logan watched as Percival brought the cup to his lips.

There was nothing fancy about his movement, but it was beautiful all the same.

His equipment wasn't flashy, either, but anyone with an eye for quality would have been taken aback by it.

This man was Percival Mercurius. He was the head of House Mercurius, a noble family of counsel.

This meant his family had a high-enough social rank to be able to visit the king anytime they pleased and freely express their opinion.

When the first king of Baldemost overthrew the wicked dragon Kaldan, he was accompanied by twenty-four heroes, all of whom were named royal knights upon the founding of the kingdom. To make up for that rank not being inheritable past the first generation, those twenty-four families were named noble families of counsel. Seventeen of those remained, and even among them, House Mercurius had a special reputation for military prowess.

He's the head of a noble family of counsel, yet he acts as an adventurer and explores labyrinths.

He's got an eccentric sense of curiosity, this one.

But Logan did not dislike this young, eccentric noble.

2

Percival got his start as an adventurer at the young age of twelve, became an A-rank adventurer at fourteen, and participated in the subjugation of the Zolhard mountain bandits by fifteen, after which he became an S-rank adventurer for his distinguished service in the military.

At age sixteen, he became the head of his house after his father's death, but he rarely attended court and spent most of the year as a solitary swordsman delving into the labyrinths of every region.

House Mercurius did not hold any territory. The number of noble families dependent on them was not small, however, and they received a large pension from the country every year. They also lived in an affluent district. For that reason, Percival was expected to serve the country in a prominent position, but instead, he obtained a role that existed in title alone and spent his days however he pleased.

Normally, that kind of thing would not have been tolerated, but the king ordered him to be left to his own devices, telling people to let him do as he liked.

There was a widespread rumor that the reason for this was because

Percival had saved the king's life when he was eighteen, subduing an assassin who had slipped in among a group of foreign envoys and had been aiming for the king's life.

Percival's sword instructor had given him the nickname the Heavenly Blade, praising his skill by saying, *"This boy's prowess with the sword is unparalleled. His talent is a gift from heaven, so he shall be called the Heavenly Blade."*

There were many adventurers who felt a resistance toward him because of his antisocial disposition and upper-class origins, but he wasn't a bad person.

He was very particular about his work, but he had never once broken a promise.

He had never bothered or bad-mouthed anyone.

Logan had a feeling he was the kind of person who had no interest in anything other than fighting tough enemies and becoming stronger and who felt fulfilled only after experiencing situations of mortal peril. The kind of person who had little interest in being a member of normal society.

He'd won the Imperial Combat Tournament at nineteen but had not participated since. Logan had heard explanations for that before, but not from Percival himself.

"Lord Percival, I've heard that you have not competed in the Imperial Combat Tournament since winning it. May I ask why?"

"Sure. I fought against a sorcerer in the semifinals."

"So I've heard."

"The sorcerer was making use of support magic and various other distractions to prevent me from approaching and then suddenly used Summon Comet."

"Ha-ha-ha, that's ridiculous. This sorcerer must have been incredible."

Summon Comet was the most powerful fire spell, capable of annihilating all in its range. It was enormously destructive but required a great deal of time to cast, and using it expended the majority of your mana. Pulling it out in a one-on-one battle during a combat tournament went against all common sense.

"Even with Alestra's Bracelet, I wasn't able to hinder the attack. The ground shook, rubble came crashing all around us, and a cloud of dust shot up into the air. For a brief moment, it was difficult to do much of anything."

"What I can't believe is that you were able to evade that kind of spell mostly unhurt."

"My opponent was not trying to hit me directly."

"Oh?"

"I became convinced of that after looking into it afterward and

giving it some thought. The activation point for Summon Comet is quite a distance from the caster. If he had used a spell with a closer activation point and attacked me directly, Alestra's Bracelet would have erased it."

Alestra's Bracelet was a treasure of House Mercurius. The founding king had received it from the goddess Pharah and had granted it to the first head of House Mercurius. It had the ability to absorb and nullify any magic.

"But if the sorcerer had been aiming not for me but for the ground around me, that would have opened other options to him. Given the chaos, the barrage of rubble, his quick incantation speed, and the total unpredictability of that maneuver, I had no sense of what he was trying to do. It was impressive. He got the best of me, but I still could have responded with a counterattack."

That's right. That shocking development had stolen the collective breath of the entire packed arena. It had been a truly unpredictable match.

It had come to an abrupt end, though, as the judge announced Percival's victory. His opponent was disqualified for breaking the rules. Killing your opponent in the combat tournament was forbidden. As such, performing an attack that seemed like it could deal lethal damage was against the rules.

"It was a totally nonsensical decision. The deadliness of an attack is completely subjective. It depends on the opponent and their fighting style. I was using a sharp sword totally capable of killing, and besides, I was barely injured at the time."

Logan looked at Percival with interest as he expressed his dissatisfaction with his own victory.

"Against someone with great speed in combat like me, finding the time to release a large-scale spell like Summon Comet should have been seen as nothing other than an incredible demonstration of my opponent's skill. Based on my ability, reactions, and the item I possessed, he'd judged that he could use the aftermath of Summon Comet to create an advantageous situation for himself. He deserved the utmost praise for his combat sense."

Percival had finally found a battle that could get him excited. He had been wondering what kind of attack his opponent was going to use next, thinking that it would probably be strong enough to defeat him. That was how worthy a rival the sorcerer had been.

"But despite that, they declared my victory. If they were going to call it for anyone, it should have been him. It was utterly inexplicable."

Logan didn't ask Percival why he hadn't opposed the judge's decision if it had bothered him so much. That just wasn't Percival's

style.

"I put up with the absurdity and took part in the championship match the next day, but it turned out to be a battle devoid of meaning or joy. How a swordsman that weak made it all the way to the final was even more of a mystery to me than the judge's decision in the previous round."

"This may be rude of me to say in front of one of the participants, but it was a brutal match."

"Ha-ha-ha. I agree wholeheartedly. Despite the way things turned out, though, the semifinal match against the sorcerer was a beneficial experience."

"Oh? Did you gain something from it?"

"I did. Every fight since then, whether against humans or monsters, I always think about that fight in some way, wondering what would have happened next. If the match hadn't ended there, he might have brought a planet down on me next..."

It wasn't until later that Logan realized that had been a rare joke from the Heavenly Blade.

A little while after that conversation, Logan used his connections and obtained some information.

First, the judge in the semifinal match was a personal martial arts instructor for a certain noble family, and for some reason, that family was obsessed with the idea of indebting Percival to them.

The next bit of information had to do with the final. It was common knowledge that Percival's opponent in the final had been the son of the king's favorite concubine at the time, but what people didn't know was that someone knowledgeable of the court had visited Percival in the waiting room and recommended that he throw the match.

Of course, Percival never spoke of that. It had, however, infuriated him, and he'd expressed that anger by declaring he would never participate in the Imperial Combat Tournament again. That was Percival's style.

So that's what happened. It's a ridiculous story, but it is believable.

The information upset Logan, and he respected Percival for resenting his own victory and considering it undeserved.

3

"This tea is great."

"Thanks, I'm glad you like it."

Logan recalled what Percival had said about the tea.

Compared to what he must have been used to growing up in House

Mercurius, the guild's tea leaves surely barely even deserved to be called such. If that manager was able to brew tea good enough for a high-ranking noble to find it agreeable, then sure enough, he was no ordinary fellow.

Much later, Logan realized what Percival had probably meant. He wasn't talking about the tea specifically but rather the experience of sharing a cup with Logan at the guild.

After spending some time enjoying the taste and fragrance of his drink in silence, Percival finished off his last sip and stood up right away.

Logan rose, too.

"Have a safe expedition."

"Thanks."

As an S-rank adventurer heading into the labyrinth alone, he knew the floor that most made sense for him to aim for was the fiftieth. However, this laconic noble was saying he was going to go to the ninetieth floor. He carried with him a number of treasures of House Mercurius, but even putting that aside, this famed swordsman's strength was abnormal.

Logan had no doubt he would see Percival again.

4

Holding an ax in each hand, the minotaur strode out of the boss room.

It could now easily pass through the entryway that had given it so much trouble before.

Outside the chamber, the stone corridor continued to the left and right.

The minotaur walked to the left.

Before long, the corridor split left and right again.

This time, it chose the right path.

After many more branching paths, the minotaur sensed something ahead of it.

A set of eyes shone in the dimly lit labyrinth.

The opponent charged at the minotaur.

It was a gray wolf that seemed intent on attacking.

The minotaur bent down and swung its left ax at the wolf's head.

But unexpectedly, the attack cut through only air.

The wolf had quickly changed course a half step before the attack, brushing the minotaur's right leg as it ran past.

The minotaur immediately turned around to intercept the wolf on its way back but felt pain shooting up its right leg.

It looked down to see a gash running from its knee to its ankle. Being wounded by this puny wolf made the minotaur's vision swim red with rage.

It swung its ax sideways in order to catch the wolf as it charged.

But again, it was unable to connect.

Instead of leaping at its prey, the wolf jumped onto the wall, then used a piece of rock jutting from it as a platform from which to aim for the minotaur's throat.

Against any ordinary opponent, this attack would have finished the fight, but the wolf miscalculated.

The minotaur used its incredible reflexes to angle its chin downward, protecting its throat.

The moment the wolf bit into the minotaur's thick chin, the minotaur dropped its axes on the ground, grabbed the wolf's head with both its hands, and charged toward the stone wall.

"Yelp!"

The wolf cried out in pain as it was smashed against the stone.

The minotaur used a headbutt to pin the wolf against the wall once more.

It easily pierced through the creature's abdomen using its two horns, which had the appearance of steel.

Paying no mind to the fluids spilling out of the wolf onto its body, the minotaur headbutted the beast again, and again, and again.

Bash. Crunch.

Squelch. Splorch.

The wolf's abdomen was ripped open, and its entrails sloshed out.

The minotaur continued to headbutt.

The wolf resisted by scratching and biting at the minotaur's arms and chest, but it did not let up.

The wolf finally stopped resisting and began to convulse.

This, too, soon came to an end, and it ceased moving entirely.

Even then, the minotaur continued to headbutt.

Suddenly, the wolf's corpse vanished, causing the minotaur to bang its head directly into the wall.

It did not understand where its opponent had gone.

Happening to look down, it noticed a small red potion and multiple silver coins.

This was not what the minotaur wanted.

Perplexed, it grew angry.

The reward the minotaur wanted was the beast's meat.

Meat. Meat.

I wanted to eat its meat.

That meat belonged to me.

Its hunger was only getting worse.

The minotaur picked up its axes and advanced farther down the corridor of the labyrinth.

5

It found another one.

A gray wolf, same as the last.

This time, the minotaur was prepared for its agility and cunning.

It held its left ax in front of its throat and its right ax toward the wolf, watching its movements carefully.

The wolf ran at the minotaur with incredible speed and jumped to the left just before it made contact.

At that moment, the minotaur quickly thrust with its right ax.

The blade cut into the creature's right cheek.

Then, the minotaur instantly brought its left ax down onto the wolf's neck.

The beast's head was severed from its neck, and its body fell to the stone floor.

Meat.

The minotaur's eyes sparkled with joy.

Just like before, though, the dead wolf's body disappeared, leaving behind only a small blue potion and some silver coins.

The minotaur's face twisted with rage.

What is happening?!

My reward was taken from me again!

This isn't fair!

Give me my meat!

The minotaur crushed the blue potion underfoot and continued its advance down the corridor.

It soon came across a third wolf.

This time, the minotaur rushed at the creature instead of waiting for it.

It feinted an attack with its left hand to guide the wolf to its right side and drove its right ax into the wolf's muzzle.

The beast was sliced in half.

Meat. Meat.

Give me meat.

Don't turn into those weird things.

Give me your meat.

It had been pleading in its mind from the moment it spotted its prey.

This time, the wolf did not vanish. Instead, its corpse simply sank

into the puddle of its own blood.

The minotaur tore off some meat with its ax and lifted it to its mouth.

It chewed thoroughly and swallowed, feeling an indescribable sense of satisfaction.

Meat.

Meat.

It devoured the flesh greedily.

When it had eaten about half of the kill, this corpse also disappeared, leaving behind some silver coins.

The minotaur's stomach was full.

For some reason, though, its hunger had still not been sated.

It collected its weapons and stood, then began stalking in search of its next target.

The minotaur fought wolf after wolf after wolf.

Though they were usually alone, occasionally, they fought in a pack.

When the minotaur encountered packs of four or five, it struggled with their joint attacks and suffered many injuries.

When the creatures died, they always left behind some mix of red potions, blue potions, and silver coins, after which, the corpses and even the bloodstains disappeared from existence.

But if the minotaur killed while praying for the corpse to remain, the bodies took longer to disappear.

It killed many wolves and ate their flesh.

Even after it tired of eating, it continued fighting simply because it wanted to.

As it fought, the minotaur grew stronger.

6

While prowling in search of its next enemy, the minotaur sensed a battle in the corridor ahead.

Once it got closer, it found a human fighting a wolf.

The human was alone.

He wore leather armor and wielded a sword.

Two wolves were lying in the corridor, covered in blood. They had likely been defeated by the human.

The beasts had taken such a beating that they could not move.

The human had run into a pack of three wolves and, having defeated two, was now fighting the last.

But the swordsman was considerably injured.

Multiple lacerations marred his face, and his clothes were soaked in

blood. His left hand was hanging limp as if having lost its mobility.

The wolf had been seriously injured as well, but it was still moving swiftly. It was holding a low position, leaping at the human and scraping at his flesh whenever it found an opportunity to strike.

The swordsman noticed the minotaur.

His eyes widened in astonishment.

The human was hanging on by a thread against his current opponent, but now, a new, stronger monster was approaching, a terrifying monster that was definitely not supposed to be there. It was only natural the man would feel terror.

But the minotaur had no intention of joining that fight.

Defeating a weakened target would be pointless.

It was more interested in watching the human's technique as he battled the gray wolf.

The human held his sword pointed toward his opponent at all times.

When the wolf attacked with its claws or its fangs, the human would twist his wrist to change the angle of his sword and parry the attack. He was staving off the strikes with the minimum amount of movement possible.

This was probably an effort to preserve stamina, but he was doing a great job of holding his posture.

He ignored the attacks that were going to graze the edges of his body. His injuries steadily accumulated as a result, but he was able to completely prevent the wolf from landing direct blows to any vital areas.

The minotaur did not possess the intelligence to analyze and fully understand the man's movements, but as it still felt like it could learn something by observing, it watched the engagement attentively.

The end of the conflict came suddenly.

The swordsman's body swayed, and not overlooking its chance, the wolf leaped at him.

The minotaur realized this was a trap set by the human.

Using his sword, the human flicked some pebbles at his opponent's face.

The beast hesitated for a second, and the human thrust his supposedly immobile left hand at the wolf's throat.

The bones in his hand made a crunching sound.

The human then stabbed the wolf with the sword in his right hand and, with a tearing sound, ripped it open from its stomach to its groin.

Having successfully fended off the attack, the swordsman fell faceup on the ground.

The wolf, with its body collapsed on top of the human, was already dead.

A red potion and some silver coins dropped onto the human's

stomach.

He let go of his sword, picked up the red potion with his left hand, and drank it while still on his back, keeping his eyes on the minotaur the entire time.

All of his injuries were quickly healed.

Even his broken hand was fully restored.

Using his sword as a crutch, the swordsman lifted himself up and then finished off the other two wolves that had been lying there on the verge of death.

One of them dropped silver coins and a red potion, and the other dropped silver coins and a blue potion.

The swordsman drank the two potions immediately.

He recuperated even more fully from his injuries, and it looked like his energy had returned as well.

Throughout all of this, the swordsman never once took his eyes off the minotaur.

The minotaur, however, had lost all interest in the swordsman once the battle had ended.

It was clear he was not at full form, and the minotaur did not feel he was strong enough to be worth killing.

The swordsman then gathered all the silver coins the wolves had dropped.

After that, he picked up his sword with his right hand, and while keeping a close eye on the massive monster, he retreated down the corridor.

The human then disappeared into a cave, and shortly thereafter, the minotaur lost sense of his presence.

Finding that strange, the minotaur followed him. Once it drew closer, what had seemed the entrance to a cave suddenly became a staircase heading upward.

There were probably more fights waiting for it up there.

But first it needed to rest.

The minotaur turned around, went back to the room where it had been born, and slept.

Chapter 3

The Guild Leader's Confusion

1

After the minotaur awoke and drank from the lake, a human appeared in the boss room.

"It's here."

The human was small of stature and wearing light armor with a short bow on his back. He was a scout.

The minotaur looked over its shoulder and then stood. It held an ax in each hand.

"Of course it's here. There's no way the boss of a floor could leave its boss room and start strolling around the corridors. That's nonsense," said a young woman who had just appeared behind him.

She was holding in her right hand a short staff, a weapon used to cast magic.

"Yeah, you're not wrong. But Marco was the one who reported that he saw it near the staircase to the ninth floor. He's not the kind of guy who would just make something up. Also, it's undeniable that potions and silver coins are being left all over the tenth floor. We just picked some up ourselves on the way here."

A third person entered the room, a large and solidly built man holding a broad longsword.

Metal plate armor covered his chest, shoulders, arms, forehead, and more, so it looked like his defense was quite high.

"So what are we gonna do? Are we leaving? Or are we gonna kill it?"

"Something about this minotaur doesn't feel right," the sorceress said in response to the scout. She wrinkled her forehead and spoke as if trying to spit out all her thoughts at once. "Why is it just standing there watching us? Why isn't it letting out its Warcry? Why isn't it charging at us? Why is it just standing there all high and mighty, like it's evaluating us? This one is definitely weird."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. I've only fought a minotaur once before, but this one seems totally different."

“Let’s take it out. If it drops that blessed bastard sword, it’s mine. You two can take whatever else it drops.”

“Nah, there’s no way it’s gonna drop that. That weapon is extremely rare. I had someone tell me once that they’ve killed around fifty minotaurs, hoping for the bastard sword, and it didn’t drop a single time.”

“That was me. I’ve killed forty-nine of these. I feel like this is the one.”

“Ah, that was you. Wait, did you kill all those by yourself? That’s impressive. But if you’re so intent on hogging the boss to yourself, be my guest. Fight it alone. I don’t want to go anywhere near that thing.”

“No, you can’t back out! I usually fight minotaurs alone, too. But not this time. I have a really bad feeling about this one. We need to fight it together. Paja, we’ll move on your command.”

“Fine, fine. All right, battle formation!”

They quickly moved from their exploration formation to their battle formation. The swordsman stood in the front, the sorceress a distance behind him, and the scout positioned himself farther back and off to the side.

This was a temporary party, but they had made sure to review one another’s specialties and skills beforehand.

“Shar, prepare to restrict its movement. Ray, advance on the enemy while she’s working on that. When you reach it, prioritize defense, and do your best to distract it. Shar, once you finish binding it, use quick-cast offensive spells in rapid succession. Once I fire an Aikros, start to prepare a powerful spell.”

Just like that, the three of them advanced on the strange monster.

Man, it really is huge.

Raystrand, who was the tallest of the trio by far, came up to only the boss’s shoulder.

This is definitely the biggest minotaur I’ve seen. It’s certainly intimidating.

But it was Raystrand’s role as the vanguard to fight it up close and draw its attention.

Sharlia’s spell should have come at any moment.

“Earthbind!” she called out.

The minotaur was advancing on Raystrand, but it suddenly came to a stop as what looked like black tree roots sprouted from the ground and coiled around its legs.

While the minotaur was looking down, distracted, Raystrand planted his left foot forward, pulled his sword back to the right, and swung it with ample speed into the side of the minotaur’s torso. Minotaurs had thick, armor-like muscle, but a blade could pass easily through that spot.

The sword was unexpectedly repelled by its muscle, but Raystrand did at least manage to injure it.

Knowing he had attracted the monster's attention, he began attacking with a flurry of quick strikes.

The minotaur swung its left ax at him.

Raystrand decided he wasn't going to be able to dodge because of the heavy weight behind the attack, so he lifted his longsword overhead to deflect its swing.

Next, the minotaur's right ax whooshed through the air as it came at him. He was tied up parrying the left ax with his longsword, so he couldn't block it.

He stepped back, just barely managing to twist his body out of the weapon's path.

"Gods... Th-that was close."

This minotaur was definitely different than the ones Raystrand was used to fighting.

Paja couldn't believe his eyes.

Did that minotaur just use a feint?

... No, don't be stupid. That was my imagination.

But Paja was a superb scout, and he'd realized from the moment he saw it that this was no ordinary minotaur. Even while making light of the situation before, he couldn't help but feel uneasy. Deciding to use Aikros Arrows, which were very expensive poison arrows, during this fight was due to his sense as a scout.

"Ice Knife!"

Sharlia shot a shard of ice at the minotaur.

"Ice Knife!"

"Ice Knife!"

"Ice Knife!"

"Ice Knife!"

She fired four more at the minotaur in quick succession.

This spell was useful because of its short casting time and because it could be utilized multiple times depending on the sorcerer's magic power and skill. Releasing five consecutively in that short span showcased her talent as a sorceress.

The first Ice Knife was aimed for its head, the other four for its chest.

The minotaur raised its left ax to its face and blocked the first shot.

Oh, come on—it blocked it?

That's okay, though. This is our key to victory.

All monsters, regardless of type, disliked attacks to their face. While it was focusing on blocking the first attack, it was unable to dodge the other four as they pierced its chest.

The plan was for Paja to shoot a poison arrow at the minotaur while

it was caught off guard by the pain from the ice shards. The minotaur would probably notice the arrow and try to dodge it but would have trouble doing so because its feet were tied up.

Aikros Arrows were imbued with strong paralysis-inducing poison and a blessing that made it difficult for them to miss their target. Once Paja hit the minotaur with one of these, their victory would be all but assured.

Paja knocked the arrow, drew it back, and released it without a sound.

The minotaur, paying no mind to the Ice Knives, knocked away the poison arrow with its left ax.

Three of the four Ice Knives had pierced the minotaur's abdomen and chest, and the other was sticking out of its left arm.

But the beast did not falter. It immediately swung at the swordsman with its right ax, ensuring he had no chance to attack.

Paja was dumbfounded.

Did it single out and block the poison arrow? ...No, that's impossible.

Whether or not the minotaur blocking it was a coincidence, misfiring with an Aikros Arrow was a heavy loss.

Aikros Arrows were made at a temple by way of a special ritual and were very expensive. Firing just one consumed all your magic power, rendering you unable to shoot a second.

He had accepted this request on the promise of putting the guild in his debt, turning a blind eye to the cheap reward. The three adventurers had agreed to split the costs of consumables equally among them.

Dammit! This thing better drop some valuable items!

Raystrand and Sharlia were thinking the same thing.

2

The minotaur was getting irritated.

The sorceress had cast the binding spell again. Flanked by the swordsman on its right and the scout on its left, it was having a difficult time dealing with the relentless sword attacks and the wide-ranging projectiles.

The sorceress's individual Ice Knives were not very strong, but they were steadily increasing the number of its injuries. The minotaur was bleeding in multiple places, and a puddle of blood was forming at its feet.

Annoying.

Annoying.

Annoying.

These humans were not particularly strong individually, but when they fought together, they became very difficult to deal with. The humans had full control of the battle, and the minotaur was furious with itself for allowing that to happen.

3

The three adventurers were starting to panic.

It wasn't supposed to go this way.

The minotaur was definitely a strong boss monster for this floor—strong enough that if a D-rank adventurer defeated it solo, they were promoted to rank C without question.

But the minotaur fought with brute strength and specialized only in close combat, so a group of C-rank adventurers should have had no trouble taking it down.

Despite that, though, they couldn't land any clean hits.

It deflected the poison arrow and had evaded all the other arrows the scout had loosed.

The sorceress was steadily piling on injuries with her Ice Knives, but the minotaur was clever enough to protect the center of its body. She had yet to hit a vital point. It had lost a great deal of blood, but its movement had not slowed in the slightest. It was as if it possessed unlimited stamina.

They were able to keep the fight to a stalemate because of Earthbind, but they had no clue how long they would have to hold on to win.

Usually when Raystrand fought a minotaur, he would aggravate it and then search for holes in its defense and try to cut off its limbs, eventually delivering the finishing blow by beheading it. This minotaur, however, was not giving him the chance he needed to employ his usual strategy.

Sharlia usually restricted the minotaur's movement and then hit it with spells in quick succession until it dropped its weapons, after which she would finish it off with a Fireball. It didn't seem as if this minotaur would be dropping its weapons anytime soon, though. Fireball's incantation was quite long, so she couldn't afford to cast it and risk being hit by an ax.

Paja had never fought the minotaur solo. It was not a good matchup for him. Even so, alongside Sharlia and Raystrand, victory should have been guaranteed.

The adventurers were barely maintaining the strength to fight by

regularly drinking red and blue potions to recover stamina and mana, respectively.

But their resources were limited.

Every time Sharlia cast Earthbind, she had to drink another blue potion, but she was running low.

Paja's short bow was a drop he'd obtained from the boss of the twentieth floor. It could fire an unlimited number of normal arrows in exchange for mana. He didn't have many blue potions left, either.

Their concentration, however, could not be replenished with potions. They were becoming increasingly fatigued, and it wouldn't be too much longer before the battle turned in the minotaur's favor.

How long they continued like this, none of them was sure.

The minotaur's frustration reached its peak.

It suddenly broke its defensive stance, screwed up its face, and took a deep breath.

"Shit, that's bad. Get a yellow potion ready! It's about to use Warcry!"

GROOOOOAAAAAAARRRRRR!!

The three of them were seized by the effects of Warcry.

They drank their potions without delay, lifting their status ailments and restoring their freedom of movement.

"We've got no choice. I'm using another Aikros."

At Paja's yell, Sharlia and Raystrand felt a rush of relief.

Using a second poison arrow would put them deeper in the red, but at this point, none of them cared about that. They just wanted out of this deadlock.

Then, something unexpected happened.

GROAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRR!!

"Huh?"

"What?"

"You can't be—"

The minotaur let loose a second Warcry.

None of them saw this coming.

After using Warcry, the minotaur was supposed to require a long cooldown period before it could employ the move again, effectively limiting it to a single use per battle.

This attack should have been impossible.

None of them could have ever imagined that the minotaur had ranked up its skill as a result of leveling up.

All three of them tried desperately to reach for a yellow potion, but

their movements had been hindered.

Sharlia crammed the tip of her staff into her mouth and bit down.

The staff had been given to her by her father and was supposedly made by elves out of the wood of an ash tree. It worked as a charm to ward off spells and also raised the user's mana. There were no longer any elves in this land, so this was a very rare item.

The staff lifted her status ailment. Now able to move, Sharlia started the incantation for Fireball as a last-ditch effort.

I don't care how strong this thing is—it shouldn't be able to take a direct hit from Fireball unscathed.

But the minotaur noticed she was up to something as she muttered the incantation for her spell.

The minotaur spun its right ax around and then slammed it into the rock at its feet. The stone shattered, and the pieces shot toward Sharlia, piercing her in the face, chest, stomach, and legs.

Her incantation was interrupted.

And then, something even more unbelievable happened.

The minotaur bellowed ferociously and broke free of Sharlia's Earthbind.

The sound of the spell shattering echoed throughout the room as its restraints disappeared.

Sharlia, in a daze from the pain, looked at the monster with fear in her eyes.

There was no way it should've been able to break out of Earthbind with its own strength.

But now, the minotaur had regained its freedom of movement, and the three adventurers had lost theirs.

First, it beheaded Raystrand.

Then, it sliced Paja clean in half.

Finally, it beat Sharlia into a bloody paste.

Thus, the battle came to an end.

The three adventurers' corpses disappeared, leaving behind the items they'd had in their possession.

4

The minotaur discovered a new function.

After the fight, it took interest in the two-handed sword the swordsman had used. It moved to set down its axes and pick up the sword. But for some reason, it placed its right ax casually against its left shoulder instead.

The ax disappeared into thin air.

It was surprised by this disappearance but no more so than for having made this gesture in the first place. After some experimentation, it came to realize that the space above its left shoulder functioned as an invisible storage in which it could keep items.

Everything it tried was successfully stored, including the sword, the staff, potions, and the silver coins.

It seemed like there was a limit on the number of things it could store, but for now, it had plenty of space.

All it had to do to pull something out of storage was think about the item it wanted and touch its left shoulder. It would then be holding the item.

This was the function that adventurers called a Bag. It was a magical ability bestowed unto adventurers when they received their holy occupation at a temple and could even be used outside of labyrinths. Knights were given a storage system called a Treasury, and merchants' were called Cargo, but Bags were much easier to handle. The downside to Bags was that they had less storage space, but that increased with level-ups, and adventurers leveled up quickly.

The minotaur used its newly acquired storage space to keep the spoils from its victory.

It liked the idea of holding on to the rewards after a good battle.

The minotaur leveled up again after defeating the three adventurers.

But it was a bitter experience. The battle had taught the minotaur that it still did not truly know how to fight.

It decided it should go up the staircase in search of new enemies.

When it stepped into the stairwell, a strange feeling swept through its body. Doing its best to ignore this, it climbed the stairs.

When it reached the ninth floor, it heard the sound of swords clashing.

There was a small cave near the staircase. The sound was coming from there.

The minotaur walked through the entrance to the cave, and the interior turned into a wide room.

Five humans were fighting against monsters with porcine faces.

The monsters were also five in number. Each wielded a different weapon: a longsword, a lance, a shortsword, an iron rod, and a thick club. Humans called these creatures "orcs."

Among the humans, there were three men wielding swords, a robed woman using a staff, and another woman holding a book of prayer open with both hands.

The humans did not notice the minotaur behind them.

Three swordsmen in the advance guard were holding off the five orcs with impressive movements.

The staff-wielding woman was muttering incantations. She screamed “Lightning!” and pointed her staff at an orc. A bolt of light flew from the staff and hit its target directly, blowing off an arm.

Without missing a beat, the swordsman on the right drove his sword through the orc’s chest.

The monster vomited blood and collapsed.

The sorceress started chanting under her breath again.

“Lightning!”

This time, she shot a hole through the abdomen of the orc struggling with the swordsman in the middle.

The swordsman on the right was fighting two opponents. He knocked the shortsword away from one but failed to avoid its partner’s attack as it swung its club down onto his shoulder.

“Hey, I need healing!” the injured swordsman yelled.

“Cure!” chanted the priestess.

The prayer book glowed with green light. The light enveloped the injured swordsman, then disappeared.

“Thanks!”

The middle swordsman stabbed the orc that had been wounded by the sorceress through its stomach and kicked it with a boot. In the same moment, the club-wielding orc fighting the swordsman on the left was raising its bludgeon overhead, poised to attack.

The orc that had been kicked collided with the club-wielding orc from behind, throwing it off balance. The middle swordsman jumped forward and beheaded it. His injury healed, the left swordsman switched places with his companion in the middle and blocked a jab from the lance-wielding orc.

The enemy dropped its lance.

A bolt of lightning grazed the swordsman’s side as it shot at an orc, dealing a fatal wound.

“Hey, that was dangerous! You could’ve really hurt me there!”

“It’s fine—I know what I’m doing. I was aiming directly at you.”

“What the hell are you doing aiming at me?”

“I knew that if you happened to dodge, it would strike the orc directly.”

Joking around with the sorceress now that their victory was all but assured, the swordsman turned.

He then noticed the monster standing behind them.

His jaw dropped, and his eyes widened in shock.

“M-M-M-M...”

“Aw, do you want your mommy? Are you gonna tell on me?”

“M-M-M-M...”

“Poor Rolf. He doesn’t stand a chance against Karen’s teasing.”

“Yeah, she’s in rare form today.”

The other two swordsmen finished off the remaining orcs and turned around, all smiles.

Then they, too, noticed the minotaur and went deathly pale.

Seeing their reactions, the two women also turned.

Karen fainted, and Rolf reached out to catch her before she hit the ground.

The priestess, Jona, lost strength in her legs and collapsed.

The other two swordsmen looked at the minotaur, dumbfounded, as if they had lost the willpower to even raise their weapons.

The members of this young party of five had just been promoted to rank E a few days earlier. An E-rank adventurer had the strength to defeat the monsters on the sixth floor one-on-one.

Their great chemistry in battle allowed them to take on five monsters on the ninth floor without much difficulty as long as they fought together, but most of them would die with one hit from the minotaur. To make matters worse, they had just finished a challenging fight, which probably made the minotaur look like the grim reaper to them.

The minotaur, on the other hand, had been thinking that they might make for a fun brawl, given how well they fought together.

But their fighting spirit had totally vanished.

Now viewing them as lackluster opponents, the minotaur lost interest, turned, and left the room.

Orcs appeared on the ninth floor. They were considered weaker individually than gray wolves, but they always acted in packs.

They used a variety of weapons. They were clumsy with edged weapons but, because of their strength, could do a surprising amount of damage with blunt instruments like clubs.

The minotaur extracted some entertainment fighting orcs if they were in a group of at least fourteen, but it soon grew bored of that as well.

Orcs did not work together in battle. Their movements were simple and predictable, and they relied solely on brute force for their attacks. However, their strength was insufficient to hurt the minotaur.

The minotaur ended up wandering into the floor's boss room.

The ninth-floor boss was a giant orc, but it was small in stature compared to the minotaur. It used a sword, but its attacks were unsophisticated.

The minotaur beheaded it easily.

The giant orc dropped a longsword and some silver coins. The minotaur left the room without even picking them up and searched for a staircase.

Logan couldn't believe what he was hearing.

A D-rank adventurer had reported seeing a minotaur by the staircase connecting the ninth and tenth floors of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

As everyone knew, the minotaur was the boss of the tenth floor.

Boss monsters were supposed to be incapable of leaving their boss rooms. That was a fundamental rule taught to all adventurers during their first training session, and it didn't just apply to the Sazardon Labyrinth but to all labyrinths across the land.

For that reason, the receptionist, who was the first to receive the report, had assumed the adventurer must have been seeing things and treated it as a low-priority matter.

Not three days later, a rumor had spread that silver coins and potions were being left all over the tenth floor.

The tenth floor had always been an unpopular area. For adventurers who didn't explore the labyrinth but instead made a living by taking on odd jobs such as guard duty, subjugation, or harvesting work, being able to advance to rank C simply by defeating the minotaur solo was a very attractive prospect. Doing so would allow them to take on more work, but they almost always avoided the wolves on the way to the boss room.

Despite the unpopularity of the wolves, some eccentric was going around slaughtering them and leaving their drops on the ground.

Logan ordered the employees at the guild to gather information relating to the tenth floor.

Soon after, he received a report that the medal of a female adventurer named Erina and her remaining items had been found directly in front of the boss room.

A person being defeated by a boss and then using the last of their strength to escape the boss room only to perish right outside of it was something that happened from time to time, so that alone wasn't anything unusual.

But if Marco actually had seen the minotaur outside its lair, that most definitely qualified.

"Could the minotaur be the one killing the gray wolves?"

He couldn't imagine how the minotaur could have left its boss room. Maybe it would be possible for someone to use a powerful possession spell to make it attack the wolves. If this minotaur was truly wandering around the labyrinth freely, he had to do something about it.

I'll call for an investigation.

Logan wrote a request for a search. The client was himself, the

leader of the guild.

The required rank to accept was C or above.

The assignment was to survey the tenth floor in order to confirm the whereabouts and status of the minotaur and to kill it if it seemed unusual in any way.

Logan descended to the first floor where the adventurers gathered. Many were gathered in front of the request board. Paja was among them. He was an elite scout and perfect for this job.

“Paja.”

“Ah, hello, Mr. Logan.”

“You’re just who I wanted to see. Could you take this on for me?”

“Let me see... Huh? Why do you need to investigate the minotaur?”

Logan filled him in on the details.

“I see. I understand the situation, but isn’t this reward a little cheap?”

“If the minotaur is in its boss room and there’s nothing unusual about it, then all you have to do is report that. We haven’t yet confirmed this as a genuine problem, so I can’t set a higher reward. Would having me in your debt be enough for you?”

“Hmm, now that doesn’t sound half-bad. All right, I accept.”

“Could we get in on that?”

The sorceress Sharlia walked up to them, wedging herself into the conversation.

The swordsman Raystrand was standing behind her.

They were C-rank adventurers on the brink of becoming B-rank.

“Wha—? Oh, hey, Shar. Don’t be ridiculous. If we split this reward between two people, we’ll end up losing money.”

“It’s three people. Ray is coming, too. You can keep the reward for yourself. We’ll split the drops evenly. Mr. Logan’s debt is enough for us. In exchange, we’ll leave the report to you. After we kill the minotaur, we’ll be descending deeper into the labyrinth.”

“Ah, I see. So were you planning on heading down anyway?”

“That’s right. Ray and I are going hunting on the thirty-second floor. We were unsure of whether or not we should use the transport service. It’s expensive, you know. We’ll stop by the tenth floor to take care of this job, then keep going down from there. Sound good, Mr. Logan?”

No, that didn’t sound good.

Sharlia and Raystrand were both capable of defeating the minotaur alone.

Though if they accompanied Paja, he wouldn’t have to buy as many poison arrows...

Now that he thought about it, Logan felt like he’d heard that Raystrand had been going after the minotaur’s rare drop. Which meant they’d probably been planning on killing it anyway.

If he left the investigation to just Sharlia and Raystrand, Paja would worry for the accuracy of the report. He had no choice but to go along with the three of them taking on the task together.

“Of course. I’m counting on you.”

“Glad to hear it. Paja, let’s do our best. Oh, and let’s split the cost of consumables.”

The three of them left to enter the labyrinth.

6

As Logan was feeling an increasing sense of dread after half a day passed without Paja’s return, Gil Linx showed up at the guild.

Gil Linx was a great sorcerer.

Born on one of the surrounding islands, he’d made a name for himself on a number of adventures. He was eventually accepted into the Baldemost Kingdom’s institute for magic, where he became an influential figure.

According to the stories, he had sealed away a devil, subjugated an ancient dragon, wiped out a group of people who had rebelled against the heavens, and more. These stories had likely been embellished, but they were spoken of as if true.

He was a household name on the northern part of the continent, and if you had to cite any great sorcerer from the children’s fairy tales told in Baldemost Kingdom, he would be the first to come to mind.

Despite being such a legendary character, though, there was not a hint of arrogance in his demeanor.

He could live as luxuriously as he wanted but had no taste for wealth or political power, instead devoting his all to maintaining the peace and happiness of the realm.

He had a calm and introspective personality, and though his primary focus in life was research, when he was needed, he had the courage to rise up and calmly deal with any challenge.

To Logan, he was a dear friend with whom he had gone on adventures when he was young and a veteran who had taught Logan everything he knew as an adventurer.

Logan didn’t know why, but Gil had the unwavering trust of the king of Baldemost.

He also worked as a consultant for the guild.

“Gil, long time no see.”

“Indeed. I helped out at the magic research facility in Mazulu through a request from the royal palace. I visited the palace for my return report, and it turned out the king has some things he wants to

talk about over dinner. I came here straightaway to show my old face at the guild and say hello. I would say you look great, but something appears to be troubling you.”

“Is it that obvious? To tell you the truth...”

He explained the situation.

“Sharlia is a relative of Eisel, isn’t she?”

“She’s his daughter. Oh yeah, wasn’t Eisel a pupil of yours?”

“That’s right. Well, I’m going to take a look at the tenth floor,” said Gil, and he disappeared.

He used teleportation magic.

Few sorcerers had the aptitude to learn this discipline.

In most cases, those who could use teleportation couldn’t learn many other spells. The guild employed two sorcerers to specialize in transporting adventurers via teleportation magic, but both were useless in combat.

By contrast, in addition to being able to use teleportation magic and a spell that allowed him to search multiple floors at once, Gil could also employ powerful offensive magic, enchant magic that was very helpful when fighting with a party, and all kinds of elite support magic. Apparently, he even knew a spell that instantly healed all friendly targets within range back to full health.

He really is a great sorcerer.

But you’d never know it from the carefree way he carries himself.

When Gil vanished to investigate the minotaur situation, Logan felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off his chest.

But that sensation of relief lasted only a brief moment.

Before Logan could finish even a single cup of tea, Gil returned and handed Logan three adventurer medals.

Medals belonging to Paja, Sharlia, and Raystrand.

7

“These three medals and several pieces of equipment were abandoned in the tenth-floor boss room. The minotaur was nowhere to be seen.”

It was difficult to imagine a scenario where this didn’t mean they were dead.

But where in the world was the minotaur? Could it have died with the adventurers? If that was the case, it would reappear soon enough.

“Is Eisel currently in Micaene?” asked Gil as he took the items the adventurers had dropped out of his Bag.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I’ll have someone look into it.”

After an employee checked for Eisel’s whereabouts, they learned he

had departed for the Padanel Wetlands on a request. It looked like he wouldn't return for a few weeks at least.

"Well, I need to go meet with the king. I recommend you handle this case with care."

"Understood. Thanks for your help."

"Of course. Until next time."

8

After Gil left, Logan fell deep into thought.

I need information first. I'll put forth a request for an investigation.

As he was thinking, the manager walked into his office.

"Mr. Logan, we have multiple eyewitnesses claiming that the minotaur was on the ninth floor."

"What?"

"It was a group of five young adventurers. They're downstairs now."

"I'll go talk to them."

Making their way to the first floor, Logan and the manager found that the eyewitnesses were a group of young adventurers with whom Logan was familiar.

They had all just become adventurers this year, but as a crew, they were very well-balanced and exhibited great teamwork. They were all enthusiastic and ambitious, and Logan was privately looking forward to seeing what they would accomplish in the future.

The five of them were sulking because they hadn't been properly greeted after coming all the way to the guild to deliver important information. Now that the guild leader was showing interest in what they had to say, though, their moods quickly improved.

According to their report, the minotaur could have easily killed them all but chose not to attack.

"And you're sure it was the ninth floor?"

Logan hoped there had been some misunderstanding, but with five eyewitnesses, that was unlikely. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with their memories or their manner of speech.

This confirmed that there was something peculiar about this minotaur. There was no way a denizen of the labyrinth should have been able to traverse a staircase and leave its floor.

First of all, monsters were incapable of perceiving the stairwells connecting the floors. They couldn't comprehend the concept of moving between floors, much less put it into practice.

An apt analogy might be the heavens and the underworld for humans.

Monsters couldn't even see the staircases, and if an adventurer went into one right before the beast's eyes, all it would see was a human disappearing. Even if you tried to force a monster into a stairwell, it would die when you pushed it through.

Technically, even humans, by nature, could not perceive the staircases.

Anyone could enter the first floor of a labyrinth, but they would be unable to see the second floor. Only after receiving a holy occupation such as knight or adventurer did someone gain the ability to see and enter the stairwells.

So if a monster enters the stairwells and moves freely around the labyrinth...

...then would that mean it's...a monster adventurer?

Chapter 4

A Duel with the Heavenly Blade

1

Having finished fighting in the depths of the labyrinth, Percival began his return trip to the surface.

Just because he was going back up didn't mean he could let his guard down, as he had to slip through many corridors containing strong monsters on his way. The climb would also make for good training.

Percival reached the forty-ninth floor and decided to take a food break.

This was a worthwhile expedition.

I made it all the way to the ninety-sixth floor, and I even mastered using Ende's Shield against large monsters.

There were five treasures handed down in House Mercurius.

Alestra's Bracelet, which eliminated magic.

Kaldan's Dagger, which protected its wielder's body from status ailments and poison.

Raika's Ring, which shot offensive magic.

Ende's Shield, which reflected physical attacks back at one's opponent.

And Bolton's Charm, which absorbed magic and granted the power of invisibility.

Percival changed up which treasures he used depending on the floor and devised fighting styles for each.

If he fully utilized the powers of the five treasures, he might have been able to make it to the one hundredth floor. However, he would have been unable to defeat the monster that served not only as the boss of that floor but of the labyrinth as a whole: the metal dragon.

In truth, it would have been difficult for him even to beat the basilisks and hydras that roamed the one hundredth floor.

That's why Percival was steadily working on increasing his strength and studying how to use the treasures of his house.

He would venture down to the heart of the labyrinth someday.

There, he would defeat the metal dragon.

He would do it alone, without anyone to ruin his enjoyment of the battle.

It was almost as if his only motivation in life was thrill-seeking.

If he had just joined a party, he could have taken down the metal dragon a long time ago.

It's not that he had never searched for companions with which to explore the depths. He had, but it had never worked out for him.

He'd had a powerful sorcerer, a proficient healer, and the kind of fighter skilled enough to put others at ease.

But the battles with them were inelegant.

It wasn't just winning that was important to Percival—the grace of combat mattered, too.

What Percival was looking for was a highly polished, sharp fighting style. Winning without that would not satisfy him.

He was unable to find others who shared this same goal, so he was still alone. That didn't bother him, though.

Done with his break, Percival stored Alestra's Bracelet and Kaldan's Dagger in his Bag, took off his boots, and changed into a pair of Fool's Boots.

Fool's Boots were a type of cursed item that lowered your physical abilities significantly when equipped. Percival used them for training.

The monsters on the floors from here on would not attack Percival. Labyrinth monsters fled from opponents significantly stronger than themselves.

Percival was exhausted from his fights on the deeper floors, but fortunately, he had no external injuries. He would be able to leave the labyrinth without drinking a red potion.

Red potions healed your wounds and removed exhaustion, but leaving those things to natural recovery led to faster growth.

He intended to use the Fool's Boots to give his body a harsh workout on his way up through the remaining forty-nine floors.

Percival stowed his favorite sword and attached a blade of simple make to his hip. It was very blunt, but he didn't mind. There wouldn't be any more battles on the way back up. He was only using it because he couldn't consider running without a sword at his hip during combat training.

He would see his wife and kids after he emerged from the labyrinth. Once again, he would drink in their cherubic expressions when they saw that he had returned safe and sound.

Percival whipped his tired body back into shape and began to run.

Now on the eighth floor, the minotaur sensed something flying toward it. It quickly tried to block it with its right ax but was too slow.

It turned out to be a knife. The blade pierced the minotaur's abdomen but did not penetrate its muscle very deeply, falling to the ground with a *clank*.

"Giii, giiii!"

A monster half as tall as the minotaur and covered in thick hair was staring at it with hate in its eyes. Humans called this monster a goblin.

Two more goblins charged at the minotaur from behind the one that had thrown the knife. There was one on the left and one on the right, and they held a club and sword respectively.

The speed of their approach was slow compared to the gray wolves. They were also rather awkward on their feet.

The minotaur tried to stop the attacks from sword and club with its right and left axes, respectively.

The goblin on the left suddenly twisted its body, however, and struck the minotaur's right ax with its club. This distracted the minotaur, and the goblin on the right took the opportunity to attack its lower abdomen with its sword.

The minotaur recoiled quickly, and the goblin's blade only lightly pricked it.

The minotaur roared with displeasure.

It did feel anger toward the strange creature that had wounded it, but it was even angrier at itself for failing to dodge such a sluggish attack.

The minotaur's rage summoned and amplified its true strength.

It lifted its right ax with incredible force and brought it down, splitting the goblin open from the top of its head down to its chest.

The minotaur followed that with a horizontal swing of its left ax, too fast for eyes to follow. The goblin's head flew from its shoulders.

The goblin that had thrown the knife turned and tried to run, but the minotaur chased it with unbelievable speed for its size and kicked the small monster in the back. The creature was sent flying into the stone wall, brains and bodily fluids splattering in every direction upon impact.

This did nothing to quell the minotaur's rage. It surrendered itself to this anger, wandering the corridors and violently butchering every goblin it laid eyes on.

The goblins always moved in packs of two or three. They were unskilled fighters, but their assaults were coordinated. Those attacks didn't pose even a slight risk to the minotaur, but they were a good

change of pace from the monotonous fighting style of the orcs, and they taught the minotaur the importance of reading your enemy's moves.

They dropped bronze coins and cheap-looking weapons, but after it had killed some unknown number of them, one of the goblins dropped a red potion. The minotaur was about to keep walking without picking it up like it usually did, but then it suddenly stopped.

A scene flashed in the back of its mind.

It saw a human drinking one of those red things.

That human was injured and weak, but after emptying one of those, it regained its strength for battle.

The minotaur bent over to pick up the red potion, then placed it in its invisible storage above its left shoulder.

It found the boss room and walked inside, but it was empty. Just a short while earlier, this floor's boss had been defeated by the adventurers.

It had come across humans twice, but they'd run as soon as they'd seen it, so it hadn't given chase.

There would be no point in chasing after creatures that didn't even try to fight.

As it roamed the floor, the minotaur eventually found the next staircase.

If it went to another floor, it would find new enemies. The minotaur understood that by now.

But its hunger would not be sated. It had no idea how to achieve satisfaction.

3

"It was on the eighth floor this time?"

Logan received some eyewitness information. Everyone working at the guild knew that he had an interest in any information related to the minotaur, so this was delivered to him right away.

"I see. So they saw the minotaur and immediately fled to the surface."

The beast was apparently alone. There was no sign of anyone nearby controlling it.

They also said the minotaur did not attack.

"Hmm... What does this mean...?"

Logan also investigated the items left behind by Paja, Sharlia, and Raystrand.

From the small number of potions that remained, he could infer that

they'd had a long and hard battle, but he didn't understand anything beyond that.

"Could those three really have had such a hard time against the minotaur? To the point where they were all wiped out...?"

No matter how strong this minotaur happened to be, they should've at least been able to bind its movement and run. In the worst-case scenario, even if one or two of them went down, *someone* should have been able to escape.

Assuming some trouble had actually led to their deaths, what in the world could have prevented Paja from leaving behind any information?

Was it really the minotaur those three had fought?

Logan just couldn't wrap his head around the situation.

4

Now on the seventh floor, the minotaur sniffed the air.

It sensed something strange. What was the source of this peculiarity?

Right there.

It was a rock on the wall of the corridor. There was something weird about it.

The minotaur stared at it intently.

It was definitely strange.

The minotaur lifted its right ax and swung it down onto the perplexing stone.

It shattered.

It was a rock slime.

When camouflaged with the wall, rock slimes became so hard that adventurers at an appropriate level for this floor couldn't put a dent in them. It was only once the camouflage was removed and they became gelatinous that they could be attacked. But the rock slime's high defense was no match for the minotaur's overwhelming force.

It left behind a red potion.

The minotaur picked it up and quickly dropped it into the invisible space above its left shoulder.

It smashed four or five more rock slimes as it prowled the corridors and then sensed something around the corner ahead of it.

Humans. Three of them.

The minotaur prepared itself.

Nesco was a level-25 amateur. She had formed a party with the swordsman Rondo and the sorceress Halbara, who specialized in enchantment magic. They were planning on exploring the twenty-eighth floor and were currently on their way down.

Something's here!

She immediately came to a halt and gestured to her party members to stop as well.

Nesco had the skill Perception, which allowed her to sense nearby presences, so she was advancing through the labyrinth ahead of the other two. Whenever they came across an enemy, she would move to the rear.

What she sensed ahead of them did not seem like a monster one typically encountered on this floor. She carefully crept forward and peeked around the corner.

It was a minotaur.

She was stunned to see something that clearly should not have been there. Her shock quickly turned to fear.

It knows we're here!

She had heard rumors that a strange monster resembling a minotaur had appeared, but she hadn't taken them seriously. Now that it was right in front of them, she was panicking.

She thought she saw the minotaur's eyes light up as it stared at them.

Nesco pulled a Vunkar Arrow from the quiver on her back, nocked it in her bow, and jumped around the corner.

The monster ran at them.

Nesco worked frantically to suppress her fear, aimed an arrow at its abdomen, and fired.

The Vunkar Arrow hit the monster and exploded.

"Run! We're going back!"

Nesco sprinted in the direction from which they had come. Rondo and Halbara ran after her.

Those three humans didn't seem very strong.

Still, the minotaur didn't like the weapon that human had used, so it decided to chase after them and kill its assailant using that same weapon.

The minotaur was able to dodge the thing the human had shot at it. Its reflexes had improved significantly since it fought the three adventurers in its boss room.

Nevertheless, the weapon did end up hitting its right ax and detonated on impact.

The explosions produced by Vunkar Arrows were small but powerful.

The minotaur's fingers were blown off its right hand, and the ax was sent flying.

It stopped for a moment to collect its ax but realized it couldn't pick it up because of its missing fingers. When it turned to eviscerate the humans, they had already run around the next turn in the corridor.

The minotaur looked at its right hand. It was incapable of a good fight with its hand in that state.

Suddenly, it had an idea. It set its remaining ax on the ground and then put its left hand to its shoulder.

It pulled out a red potion.

The minotaur tossed the vial into its mouth and swallowed it in one gulp.

The fingers on its right hand immediately began to regenerate.

It drank another, and the regeneration rate increased.

If the three humans had seen this, they would surely have been astounded.

Potions worked only on humans. Even if you made an animal or a monster drink one, it would have had no effect. That was common knowledge.

But the red potion had just healed the minotaur.

After receiving the goddess Bora's blessing and becoming an adventurer, the minotaur became capable of receiving potions' effects.

Humans used strange tools. The minotaur had become aware of that.

Regardless of how weak one was, the tool it was wielding could empower it to take down a stronger opponent.

The minotaur could not afford to be careless.

7

The monsters of the sixth floor were red bats.

The tiny monsters fluttered around and barely made a sound. The minotaur had a lot of trouble hitting them.

After a while, it eventually stopped taking large swings with its axes and instead started swatting them with small swipes of its upper arms.

The latter strategy was much more effective.

The bats died easily if a hit connected.

It didn't even need to be a direct hit—just grazing a bat would kill it.

The bats' claws, fangs, and screeches couldn't damage the minotaur at all.

Most of the time, the red bats dropped two or three bronze coins. Red potions were rare.

The minotaur picked up a red potion and drank it.

Its exhaustion faded, and its minor injuries vanished.

Just as it was thinking of moving on to the next floor, though, it encountered an interesting enemy.

8

Percival ran nimbly through the tenth, ninth, eighth, and seventh floors. His speed was astonishing given that he was wearing a pair of Fool's Boots.

Huh?

When he reached the sixth floor, he noticed something strange on his Map.

Map was a skill given to adventurers that presented the areas of the labyrinth they had visited as a map they could see in their minds. Once their Map skill level increased, it would also display the monsters or people on that floor.

Kaldan's Dagger, which was currently stored in his Bag, awarded another incredible feature. Just by equipping it, you received a detailed map of the floor you were on even if you hadn't yet explored it, and you could see the locations of all monsters and people.

This floor was supposed to have only red bats, but his Map revealed an enemy that seemed rather powerful. It was near the staircase to the fifth floor.

Percival felt a passing curiosity, but because he really wanted to get out of the labyrinth quickly, he decided to ignore it. He would probably cross paths with the monster for a moment, but by the time it noticed him, he would already be on the staircase.

Just as he was about to enter the stairwell to the fifth floor, though, he felt a bloodlust emanating from behind him. He turned and drew his sword.

A minotaur?

What was the boss of the tenth floor doing here?

This didn't make sense. But labyrinths never made sense.

Without thinking deeply about it, he turned the sword in his right hand toward the enemy and began his assault.

He didn't even think of drawing his favorite sword from his Bag. He didn't deem it necessary. He expected to win this fight with a single blow.

Percival attempted to stab the minotaur in the heart, but although his blade sank deep into the minotaur's chest, it stopped before reaching its true target.

Huh?

The monster had just barely avoided a lethal blow.

Not even the faintest hint of a smile remained on Percival's handsome face, but his eyes lit up.

Looks like I'll be able to have a little fun with this one.

All thoughts of exhaustion vanished from his mind.

9

When it saw the new human speeding toward the staircase, the minotaur suddenly became very angry.

It was angry at the human for ignoring it.

That anger turned to bloodlust.

The human then turned and stabbed it with his sword.

That attack was too fast to dodge. The minotaur was able to pull back slightly, but the weapon cut deep into its chest, and the wound began to bleed profusely. The pain was accompanied by rage and... joy.

This opponent was stronger than any it had encountered so far. His strength was on a completely different level.

The human's sword was just long enough to call a longsword, and it was surprisingly thin.

For a moment, the minotaur felt something resembling fear.

This was the first time it had experienced this emotion.

Before long, the feeling gave way to anger.

Getting fired up, the minotaur attacked the swordsman.

Faced with this new, powerful enemy, it was finally able to forget the hunger that had plagued it from the day it was born.

10

To Percival's surprise, he wasn't able to kill the minotaur right away.

He had fought a minotaur before. His memories of that fight were working to his detriment.

A slash attack that should have cut off its arm was instead repelled by its thick muscles, leaving only a light wound.

His attacks were obstructed repeatedly by the minotaur's unexpectedly quick ax swings.

He could probably end the battle instantly if he pulled even one of his blessed items out of his Bag, but this monster was surprisingly intelligent and quick-witted. It didn't seem like it would give him that chance.

As a result, Percival had no choice but to do what he could with this longsword.

But that was okay, because this would make for a fun challenge.

However, no matter how many times he slashed at the minotaur, it did not lose its fighting spirit. It seemed to only get fired up even more.

I can't panic.

Time to try the new techniques I've been working on.

He swung his sword in one arc after another, vertical and horizontal, big and small.

The monster gradually lost the room to counterattack and was driven back toward the wall.

Just as Percival was thinking he would end the battle any second, his knee suddenly gave out.

Shoot!

Even with his superhuman strength, his stamina still had a limit, and his body was giving way to exhaustion.

Percival unleashed a string of quick slash attacks.

The minotaur backed up half a step. As soon as it did, Percival jumped away.

He then slipped his left hand into a small pouch at his hip.

He was reaching for a red potion.

11

The human's form was beautiful as he swung his weapon.

This minotaur's entire body was being lacerated by the man's brilliant swordplay, but it was surviving by focusing on guarding its vital points.

He then changed his strategy, unleashing a diverse range of attacks in quick succession.

Counterattacking became difficult, and the minotaur was steadily

pushed backward.

Just as it was thinking that it could not retreat any farther, the swordsman's posture collapsed for a moment. He quickly recovered and came at the minotaur with a series of quick moves.

The minotaur took half a step away and collected itself.

The swordsman then created distance between them by leaping backward, and his right hand reached for the pouch at his hip.

The minotaur advanced on the human, using both axes to flick stones at him from the ground.

The swordsman deflected three rocks with his sword and two others with his left hand.

He did not allow any of the other stones to so much as graze him.

However, the item he had been trying to extract from his pouch with his left hand had fallen to the ground.

It was a red potion.

The minotaur realized his opponent must have been tired.

It did not reach that conclusion through any kind of conscious analysis—it simply sensed it.

The minotaur decided it would not give the swordsman a break.

It approached the human while he was busy fending off the rocks, planting itself at the outer reach of its axes.

It planned on maintaining that position.

The minotaur with its axes had a slightly greater reach than the swordsman with his longsword. If the minotaur swung its axes unabated while maintaining this position, its opponent would be forced to prioritize defense and would have trouble attacking.

The swordsman tried repeatedly to gain some separation, but the minotaur obstructed him each time.

Every now and then, the minotaur would allow one of the human's large swings to connect with its side in order to throw off his timing.

The swordsman should have been under duress from this unexpected turn in the battle, but instead, a slight smile seemed to be dawning on his ever-expressionless face.

The swordsman adjusted his strategy.

He gave up on creating any space between them or using his red potion, instead meeting the minotaur at its desired distance and aiming for the beast's throat and heart.

The force behind his blade was tremendous.

The minotaur did not fall back, not even when its face was slashed. If it moved away at all, it would have to extend its arms too far, weakening the power of its ax swings.

Its chest was painted with blood, but it would not give ground for any reason.

As long as the minotaur held this distance, no matter how much skin

and flesh the swordsman scraped off, he would be unable to cleave through its thick chest and reach its heart.

The minotaur's entire body was now covered with blood. The swordsman was also stained deep red from the fountain gushing out of the minotaur's chest. Blood was even falling into the man's eyes, but he did not close them for a second.

They continued like this for a long time with the swordsman fighting toe-to-toe with the minotaur, but the swordsman did not allow an ax to connect with him even once.

This human is very impressive.

If what the minotaur was feeling toward its opponent had to be expressed in human speech, it would probably have been something close to respect.

But humans had limited stamina. After slashing the minotaur's arms with a chain of particularly threatening attacks, the swordsman's breath became ragged, and his movements slackened.

The minotaur's right ax then sank into his right shoulder.

The swordsman stumbled.

His eyes had not lost their strength, but dark bags had formed around them from exhaustion.

The minotaur held its breath and continued to strike, then landed a rare direct hit on the swordsman's blade, repelling his attack.

He had probably lost the strength to properly evade.

The minotaur continued pressuring the swordsman until he eventually fell.

It swung its left ax and severed the swordsman's left leg at the knee.

The minotaur took one step forward and aimed for the human's torso with its right ax.

The swordsman interrupted that by quickly slashing the minotaur's left leg, throwing it off balance. He then cut the beast's throat with impossible speed.

The minotaur was able to twist its neck just enough to avoid a fatal wound, but blood began gushing out, raining down onto the swordsman's lower body.

The minotaur's blood and the swordsman's intermingled to the point where it was no longer possible to differentiate between the two.

Having lost its balance entirely after the strike to its neck, the minotaur began collapsing onto the swordsman.

As it was falling, it was aware that another swing was zeroing in on the back of its neck, so it drove its left elbow into the swordsman's right hand.

The sword merely grazed the side of the minotaur's head.

The minotaur suddenly noticed its opponent was holding a potion in his left hand.

The same potion he had dropped earlier.

The minotaur had no idea when he had found the time to re-collect that.

It could not afford a moment of carelessness with this human.

The minotaur used its right hand to knock the vial away, causing it to shatter against the wall.

The minotaur quickly adjusted its grip on its right ax and swung it around its back.

The sword sang as the minotaur repelled a strike with its ax.

The swordsman pulled his weapon away.

The minotaur slammed its elbow into the swordsman's chest and used the recoil from that blow to regain its feet.

The tip of the sword passed right in front of its throat.

The swordsman, now on the ground, didn't even try to rise. He had probably lost the stamina to do so.

He closed his eyes and laid his sword on top of himself.

The minotaur tried to shuffle around to the swordsman's head.

Without a sound, the sword swiped at the minotaur, visible only as a trail of light. It almost felt like it had happened in slow motion.

The sword executed a beautiful sweeping motion.

It cut halfway through the minotaur's right ankle.

The beast tried to locate the weapon, but it had somehow returned to the swordsman's chest.

The minotaur, the human, and the ground around them were all soaked red and black. Despite that, the sword shone a bright silver.

The swordsman appeared to be sleeping, but if the minotaur carelessly went near him, it would probably be instantly assailed.

The swordsman had formed an arc around himself as beautiful as a full moon, inside of which he was completely safe.

The minotaur did not know what to do.

If it just waited, the swordsman would eventually die.

All it had to do was prevent him from using a red potion.

Waiting was probably the right move.

Suddenly, it laughed at its own foolishness.

I'm an idiot.

What I've been seeking is not victory.

What I seek is battle.

What I seek is a stronger me.

I've found an incredible enemy who is able to overpower me even on the verge of death.

Don't die.

Torment me for even a bit longer.

The minotaur circled around to the swordsman's head while being careful of the sword's range.

It was racked with pain and bleeding all over its body.

It did not have much stamina left, either.

Aiming at the swordsman's head or heart, however, proved impossible.

It was the sword.

As long as the blade existed, he could not be defeated.

His sword had become his life.

Wary of the weapon, the minotaur stepped into his enemy's range.

Clink!

The sword lashed out at the minotaur's legs with pinpoint accuracy, but the minotaur caught it between its axes, pinning it. When it tried to pull back, the minotaur twisted its axes with all its strength, shattering the blade.

The swordsman opened his eyes halfway and stared at the remains of his sword.

The minotaur drove its ax into the man's heart.

His body spasmed, and he coughed up blood.

The swordsman looked at the minotaur. There was no anger, fear, or hatred in his eyes.

While returning the swordsman's gaze, the minotaur severed his head from his shoulders.

The minotaur's body began to change.

It was another level-up.

Its wounds disappeared.

The minotaur then gained a fearsome amount of strength.

It regretted that the injuries inflicted by the swordsman disappeared so quickly.

So this was what swords were capable of.

He had been an excellent enemy, and this was a satisfying victory.

The swordsman disappeared, leaving behind a great many items. He must also have had a storage system.

Feeling a deep sense of satisfaction, the minotaur picked up a bracelet and a shortsword and put them in its own Bag.

The bracelet and shortsword were actually both engraved with elite seals of ownership, applied by a human sorcerer. The seals meant that no one other than the proper owner could store these items in their Bag. What the minotaur had just done should have been impossible.

Tons of red potions had fallen to the ground, and the minotaur collected them and put them in its Bag as well.

Its injuries had been healed, but it was mentally and physically exhausted. Its head also felt hazy.

The minotaur returned to its room on the tenth floor.

It drank water from the lake, then slept like a rock.

When it woke up, it drank again.

It felt replenished in mind and body.

Its combat strength had increased significantly, to the point where its former self could not compare.

Its intelligence had increased more dramatically than anything.

Monsters had low intellect by nature. Minotaurs' intelligence was particularly paltry, even among monsters.

As the minotaur leveled up, though, its intelligence increased, and its knowledge, understanding, critical thinking, memory, problem-solving ability, and more all improved exponentially. Its thoughts were now clear, and it could recall the events that had happened from its birth until now in vivid detail.

It recalled its battle with the swordsman, and it understood more deeply that it had won a battle it had no business winning. It replayed the actions of the swordsman and its own repeatedly in its head, evaluating them.

He had been a tremendous enemy. His skill had been astonishing.

The minotaur seared into its mind the beautiful arcs the swordsman had cut through the air with his sword.

A short while later, the minotaur left its room.

It soon encountered two wolves.

They threw themselves at the minotaur, but it slashed at them with an ax, barely expending any effort as it killed both instantly. It was hard to believe these enemies had once given it a hard time.

The minotaur yet again ascended the stairs.

It likely wouldn't encounter any strong monsters if it kept going up, but it decided it may as well see how far it could go.

The swordsman had been going up, after all. What kind of place had been his destination?

The minotaur decided it wanted to see for itself.

Chapter 5

Memories

1

In the end, night fell without Logan being able to dispatch a new party. He went to work the next day determined to take more resolute, concrete action against the minotaur. He ended up overloaded with clerical work, however, and before he knew it, it was evening.

A group of adventurers who had made a day trip of investigating the early floors of the labyrinth returned and gave their report.

This time, the minotaur had been spotted on the sixth floor. It did not initiate combat with humans, but there had been eyewitness reports of it killing other monsters.

It seemed like the rumors about the minotaur had spread considerably in the last few days. Because the creature would not attack unless you attacked it first, though, only a small number of people were taking this unusual situation seriously.

The next morning, Logan received shocking news.

An adventurer medal and several items had been brought to reception, which likely meant someone had died. After inspection, it was determined that they belonged to Percival Mercurius.

2

Logan descended to the first floor of the guild and went to the reception area.

The Heavenly Blade's dropped belongings were piled unceremoniously on the floor. It was a veritable mountain of goods.

He could tell at a glance that some of the items were exceedingly rare.

About twenty young adventurers stood around the pile.

"Mr. Logan. There is no doubt this adventurer medal is his."

“This is the group that found it?”

“Yes.”

“Who is their leader?”

“This man here.”

The receptionist gestured to a man named Chiran. Logan knew him to be a D-rank scout.

“I’m not anyone’s leader. I found the pile of stuff, but I couldn’t take it all back alone. There were also some items I couldn’t put in my Bag for whatever reason, so I asked passing adventurers for help.”

“I see. Chiran, sorry to ask this of you, but please wait a moment. Hey! Inspect this medal again for me. I want to see it for myself.”

The employee inspected it again right in front of Logan, but sure enough, there was no mistaking it was Percival’s.

Turns out he was level 98. Even considering his prowess, that’s much higher than I thought.

When adventurers died in the labyrinth, they left behind their medal and their items. It was the duty of all adventurers to deliver to the guild any dropped medals or personal belongings they found.

If a month passed without the owner showing up, half the items went to whoever had found them, and the other half went to the guild.

The deceased adventurer’s family was given the first opportunity to purchase the wares, but it was rare for the family of an adventurer to have much money. In the event that the family did buy back one of their dead loved one’s belongings, the most the average person could afford was a cheap trinket to keep as a memento. The more valuable items were rarely reclaimed.

The finder had the right to choose whether to be paid in cash or in kind for the guild’s share, and if they chose to be paid in kind, they had priority in choosing which items they received.

It was common for expensive items to have seals of ownership engraved on them, so they were easily traceable if they were stolen or ended up on the black market.

Because reporting the items was a surefire way to legally obtain something you wanted, the rarer a dropped item was, the more likely it was to be delivered to the guild.

At any rate, the pile of loot left behind by Percival was objectively enormous.

As an adventurer’s level increased, so did their Bag’s capacity.

There was no way an ordinary adventurer would have been able to store so much.

So the Heavenly Blade is actually dead...

Logan had Chiran and the other adventurers give him the details about how the items had been discovered. No one denied that Chiran

had found them first. He had promised the rest of them a reward of ten gold coins each to help transport them.

Ten gold coins, huh?

Logan counted the adventurers other than Chiran. There were eighteen of them, which meant he'd promised to pay 180 gold coins.

There were many exceptional treasures among this pile that had a rather plain appearance. These young adventurers probably hadn't realized what a horde they had stumbled upon.

Chiran was pestering him to go ahead and appraise the goods. That was understandable. He was likely uneasy about whether or not he could actually pay the 180 gold coins. They were all going to be in shock, though, once they heard how much this haul was worth.

Logan ordered the employee in charge of reception to explain the rights of the finder and to carry out the procedures according to regulations. He also ordered them to make a copy of the inventory once the wares had been appraised.

As Logan turned toward the staircase to return to his room, his feet were oddly heavy.

He felt like he'd suddenly aged twenty years.

The sixth floor? That's ridiculous.

It wasn't strange that the Heavenly Blade had been on the sixth floor. He'd never once used the transport service, preferring to delve into the labyrinth and return to the surface by running.

Nevertheless, it was unthinkable that a monster strong enough to kill the Heavenly Blade could have been on the sixth floor.

The labyrinth was a place where unforeseen dangers lay around every corner. By himself, even the Heavenly Blade was at risk in its deepest floors. He probably wouldn't have been able to defeat the final floor's metal dragon in a one-on-one fight.

But the sixth floor? There's no way. There's absolutely no way.

Logan couldn't imagine a monster getting the best of Percival. Which meant that whoever had killed him couldn't have been a monster. Whoever did the deed had probably set some kind of cowardly trap.

Percival had been such a great swordsman that he could have handled dozens of opponents by himself in a fair fight, and the labyrinth was not a place to which you could send an entire armed force all at once. It was a place where your skill alone decided whether you lived or died. You couldn't just succeed by investing a lot of money in soldiers or weapons. Political power had no influence there.

That's why the Heavenly Blade loved the labyrinth.

He made it his home, turning his back on the glory and drama of the outside world.

*He wanted only to be an adventurer.
And someone killed him.
Damm it all!
Who the hell did it?! And what kind of trick did they use?!*

3

“Logan! You’re in there, aren’t you?”

Logan jumped with surprise.

It was Gil’s voice. It seemed he had called out multiple times.

“S-sorry, Gil. Come on in.”

Gil Linx opened the door and entered the room.

Logan stood up and invited his guest to sit on the sofa, then took a seat across from him.

“My apologies for coming so late. The king had a number of assignments for me. Our conversation went on for quite a while. I ended up staying at the palace overnight, then spent the better part of the following day completing the tasks that were most urgent.”

Listening to Gil’s soft voice finally calmed Logan down.

“Sounds like you’ve had it rough, too. Did you eat breakfast already?”

“I ate with the king. The princes sat with us, too.”

“*Princes?*” Logan asked, emphasizing the plural.

“That’s right. At first, only the king’s second son was there, but his majesty summoned the eldest prince after I asked how he was doing.”

“No way! You never cease to amaze me, Gil. Were the queens present?”

“Only the second. The king said the first queen was coming down with a cold and was refraining from breakfast that morning.”

“This morning, too, I’m sure. I’ll bet it was the second queen who told the king she was sick.”

“Hmm. Is that what you’ve heard?”

“Am I wrong?”

“That I don’t know. Still, I think the first and second queens are both kind people at heart. It’s only natural for there to be discord when it comes to power and position at court, but it’s irresponsible to blindly assume things about other people.”

“Hmm. I seem to remember you telling me something similar several decades ago.”

“Ha-ha. Was I telling you about how those we view as monsters may actually think of us as the monsters?”

“That was it! That was a bit of a shock for me. You convinced me

that the way humans treat monsters is more unjust than the fate to which we condemn the worst of thieves.”

“That’s looking at it from a human perspective. What monsters view as happiness and unhappiness, justice and injustice, good and evil, success and failure, gain and loss differ from the way humans think. I do believe, though, there is some logic or value that humans and monsters share.”

“That may be because you spend more time with monsters than you do with humans. Hold on—you haven’t become a monster yourself, have you?”

They both laughed merrily. Before Logan knew it, his gloom and anger had subsided, and his usual clearheaded frame of mind had returned.

“Oh, by the way, there was a fistfight by reception on the first floor. What was that all about?”

“Huh? A fistfight? That’s news to me. Did that happen just now?”

“It seemed to have something to do with the transportation of goods. I heard someone complaining they deserved a higher reward than promised, and some of them were demanding extra items as compensation.”

“Ah, I see. I’m not surprised that came to blows. I can’t exactly blame them.”

“Now, that’s a surprising sentiment coming from you.”

“That reminds me. I need to tell you about what’s going on.”

Logan explained the situation. He then asked Gil for advice on how best to expose the coward who had set some kind of trap to kill the Heavenly Blade.

“You’re coming at this from the wrong angle.”

“How so?”

“Think about it carefully. The start of all this was the initial report of the aberrant minotaur. That minotaur definitely exists and is gradually making its way up to the higher floors. The disappearances of Eisel’s daughter’s party and Percival are parts of the same case.”

“I can’t deny the possibility, but—”

“It is hard to imagine any of them could have been defeated by the minotaur. Regardless, at this point, the beast is our only lead.”

“Well...”

“As you said yourself, Percival’s death may have been wrought by human hands. If you make that assumption, however, it will take the investigation outside the labyrinth. Where does your duty lie?”

“Hmm...”

“In any case, a minotaur roaming beyond its designated area is undoubtedly abnormal, and this issue cannot be ignored. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Logan didn't respond. Compared to the death of Percival, he just couldn't conceive of the minotaur's strange behavior as that big a deal.

"First, we need to find the monster and kill it. If we then decide there is no connection to Percival's death, we can begin the search anew."

Logan needed some time to digest those words. After a lengthy silence, he responded with a firm tone.

"You're exactly right. As you say, we need to start with the minotaur."

"I'm glad we're on the same page. I'm going to the labyrinth. I'll start at the first floor and work my way down to the tenth until I find the beast. And then, I'll kill it."

Logan didn't thank him or apologize. He knew Gil wouldn't want to hear it. It would probably even offend him.

He just bowed his head deeply instead.

"Before I go, I want you to have this."

Gil was holding a seashell in his right hand that was about the size of an ear.

"Is that...a Serruria shell?"

"That's right. Its color is similar to the Serruria flower, which is also known as the Blushing Bride. Like the first love of a young maiden, its color is heartrending yet fleeting at the same time."

"What's with the sudden poetry? Are you remembering someone special?"

Rather than answering Logan's teasing question, Gil simply brushed aside long-distant memories and put the shell to his mouth, light reflecting off it in all the colors of the rainbow. He blew into it with a light puff of air, rustling his white beard in the process.

A bluish-purple ball of light formed in the shell.

"This shell now stores some of my life energy. As long as this ball of light is shining, that means I am still alive."

"Hey, what're you saying? Are you planning on dying before me? Actually, hang on a sec. Didn't I hear that the king of the underworld granted you an immortal body after you collected on a debt?"

Gil laughed. "These rumors never cease to amaze me."

Gil's parting gift put Logan at ease.

Now that he had calmed down, he realized just how shaken he had been over the Heavenly Blade's death. Gil was truly kind.

"Thank you, Gil."

The great sorcerer smiled broadly. Then, just as he was about to teleport, he seemed to remember something and spoke.

"I don't know if there is such a thing as a happy way to die, but if you find a way that you want to live and are able to proceed that way

until the moment you die, I think you could call that a happy life. No one can place value on a person's life except the one who lived it. Other people will evaluate your time on this earth by their memories of you—provided your corpse isn't the first image that comes to mind—but that is not the true value of a life.”

After delivering what almost felt like a final request, Gil Linx headed to battle.

4

Logan had met Gil Linx about forty years ago.

One day, when Logan was at a guild in the border province of Sheradan, which was located in the southern part of the continent, Gil found him fighting with a guild employee over the reward for a mission and helped him out.

Gil was already an S-rank adventurer at the time. He politely explained to Logan the basics of being an adventurer, after which Logan realized his mistake and apologized.

Gil then pointed out that the guild had added an unexpected request after Logan had accepted the job and told the employee to increase the reward. The employee obeyed while humbling himself profusely, and it was then that Logan realized just what kind of people S-rank adventurers really were.

S-rank adventurers held a special place in the world.

You could apply to become an S-rank adventurer after reaching level 61 or higher or after reaching level 51 with distinguished service. Being level 51 or above meant you possessed combat strength equivalent to the most elite knights in the kingdom.

The most well-known S-rank adventurers often ended up taking on the role of envoy or arbitrator for issues of international concern. They were also occasionally given temporary command of military units and asked to contribute to strategy sessions.

S-rank adventurers were small in number and often employed by royal families or various lords. In order to maintain their free positions, they looked to the guild for patronage.

To an Adventurers Guild, an S-rank adventurer was a top commodity and also a trump card that allowed them to reject any interference that threatened their high level of independence. For that reason, in high-priority cases, it was practically the guild's duty to act as mediator for S-rank adventurers and protect their rights even if it meant negotiating against a country.

After their meeting at the guild, Logan spent a period of time being

led around on adventures with Gil.

Gil had probably noticed Logan's true identity from the beginning.

Logan was not human. He was a half-dwarf.

Humans were under the belief that dwarves had died out in ancient times. In reality, however, dwarves were still around, and their land was located in the sprawling highlands just southeast of the center of the continent. A single human family had taken up residence there after getting lost and stumbling across it, and their youngest daughter had grown up there and married a dwarf. Logan was their child.

Dwarves were shorter than humans but had strong muscles and bones. Their stamina was exceptional, giving them unparalleled staying power during long battles. Also, their life span was about three times longer than humans.

Logan was a drifter at heart. Despite knowing that he would never be allowed back home if he left the land of the dwarves to join the world of humans, he'd set off on a journey without a clear destination in mind.

His mother had taught him how to speak the human tongue, but he'd had no experience with human culture, much less an understanding of their customs and values.

Gil taught him how to make sense of the human world and also how to live as an adventurer.

They adventured together for two years before parting ways, then met again four years later by total chance.

They had both been participating in a secret mission to save a shrine maiden who had been confined by a high-ranking priest of the Holy Kingdom of Roahl.

The adventurers with whom they'd been working dropped out one after another, until eventually only Gil and Logan remained. Outnumbered four to two, they'd ended up having to take on a group of temple knights, but wielding a shortsword in each hand, Gil had ended up taking out two of them by himself without using any magic.

Now that I think about it, I've never asked him why he didn't use magic in that situation.

After that, they adventured together for nearly five years.

That was the period when Gil had learned to use teleportation magic, and they'd ended up spending those five years traveling all around the world so he could set up teleportation sites.

Speaking of teleportation, they experienced some incredible scenes during their travels.

The lord of one of the regions to which they'd traveled ended up aiming for their heads and dispatched a group of knights to chase them down. Gil had hidden Logan in some tall grass and run into a labyrinth while ensuring their pursuers saw him do so.

They subsequently proceeded to blockade the entrance to the labyrinth.

Logan had been startled when he saw that.

You couldn't teleport out of a labyrinth. It was possible to move around within its confines by means of teleportation, but the labyrinth and the outside world were not connected magically. There was no way to leave other than by stepping out of the first-floor entrance.

Whether or not their pursuers had known that Gil could use teleportation magic was irrelevant. Whatever one's abilities, a person could leave a labyrinth only through its entrance, and now that he had gone inside, Gil was as good as stuck.

"Come on, Gil. Are you planning on sticking it out in the labyrinth until they leave? You really should have brought me with you..."

"No way. That would take forever."

"Gil! How in the world did you get out?"

"Ha-ha. Sorry for making you wait. All right, shall we move on to the next town?"

"H-hey. Isn't it impossible to teleport out of a labyrinth?"

"So they say."

"No, I've definitely heard that the labyrinth and the outside world aren't connected magically."

"That's right—they're not. So all you need to do is connect them."

"Huh?!"

Gil had been inventing new spells and improving upon existing magic over the course of the entire trip. He was a genius in the truest sense of the word.

After they parted ways for the second time, Gil had made the Baldemost Kingdom his new base of operations, gained the trust of the king, and had been invited to the kingdom's institute for magic.

Logan had settled down in Ardana. He eventually rose to rank S, but then his surroundings had become significantly more restrictive, and he was constantly being crowded by people wanting to form a connection with him.

When Logan grew fed up with it all, Gil had visited him and used his teleportation magic to take Logan to Baldemost. Carrying someone the distance from Ardana to Baldemost with one teleport was an unprecedented act, but nothing Gil did could surprise him anymore.

Gil introduced him to the leader of the Micaene Adventurers Guild at the time, who found him a party.

The group was comprised of Logan, who wielded a war hammer; Zorn, who wielded a longsword; Saika, a sorceress specializing in enchant magic; and Mejiana the thief.

A little while afterward, a sorcerer named Gargos who specialized in offensive magic and a priest named Zofu were added, completing the

party.

They were incredible.

Logan was their S-rank leader.

Zorn was rank A at first but later advanced to rank S.

Saika, Mejiana, and Gargos were all B ranks when they joined but later became A ranks. Zofu went from a C rank to an A rank.

For nearly ten years, they had the time of their lives exploring the labyrinth.

They even invited two temporary party members and took down the metal dragon twice.

They also completed requests on the surface—always the most difficult ones.

Eventually, the glory days came to an end. Zorn died, and Saika and Mejiana retired. Gargos also fell back from the front lines and became an instructor for the next generation. Zofu received a divine revelation and departed for a remote region.

With Logan unable to go into the labyrinth much anymore, the guild leader named him second-in-command and gave him on-the-job training. He passed to Logan all the information he had collected over the years and died soon afterward. He had recommended Logan as his replacement.

Logan had been leader of the Micaene Adventurers Guild for around ten years now. He couldn't remember how long exactly.

He'd quickly grown tired of this life as well. He hated being stuck in one place. When Logan had come to this town, he was a strong warrior in the prime of his life, and truth be told, he was too young to be considered an old man even now.

He was starting to think the day he would leave his work to his successor and rejoin the path of adventure was drawing near.

Logan opened the top drawer of his desk.

Inside the Serruria shell, the soft, bluish-purple ball of light was shining.

Its light warmed his heart.

Chapter 6

The Sorcerer Strikes

1

The minotaur left the tenth floor to climb up through the labyrinth again, this time speeding through the ninth, eighth, seventh, and sixth floors before arriving at the fifth.

The monsters of the fifth floor were called “kobolds” by humans.

They were only a third as tall as the minotaur, covered in white fur, and moved around the domain restlessly. After mowing down the fleeing kobolds, the minotaur went up to the fourth floor.

Once it began searching for the staircase ascending from the fourth floor, it was suddenly assailed by a magic attack that came flying out of the darkness ahead of it.

The spell struck the minotaur near its heart, knocking it off its feet.

As it was falling, it instinctively twisted its body to the left.

A bullet of light landed to the right of it and exploded.

Had it not pivoted, it likely would have received a fatal wound.

The minotaur swiveled as it fell, rolled on the ground like a barrel, and wrenched its upper body upright.

A spell that looked like snakes of light twisting together stretched toward it, aiming for its head.

It tried to dodge, but one of the beams clamped down on its right cheek as if biting it.

The flesh where it connected was blasted away, and it lost vision in its right eye.

Its ears were ringing thunderously.

The minotaur’s intellect, however, told it that this was an opportunity to counterattack. Three spells of enormous strength had just been released in a row, so there would be some time before the next.

That was the minotaur’s reasoning as it charged forward into the darkness.

An electric attack immediately shot toward it, though, piercing the center of its chest and sending massive sparks flying.

Its giant frame was thrown backward.

The minotaur felt like its mind and body were going numb, but it still managed to drag itself behind a boulder.

Its chest was burned hideously, and fierce pain ran through its body.

It drew three red potions out of its storage and downed them all at once. Its injuries were healed.

The minotaur poked its head out from behind the boulder and assessed the situation.

Its opponent was standing calmly in the middle of the corridor, making no effort to move toward or away from his target.

He was wearing clothes made of thick cloth that protected his entire body. Even his face was covered, save for his eyes, nose, and mouth.

They were likely clothes imbued with some kind of special defensive effect.

Though hard to see through the cloth, his face was lined with wrinkles, and he had white hair around his mouth. A human looking at him would have realized he was old. Yes, very old indeed.

But monsters in labyrinths were born fully grown and stayed the same until they died, so the minotaur did not understand the concepts of youth and old age. It merely sensed that its opponent was a veteran fighter.

The sorcerer pointed a finger toward the minotaur and fired a flaming bullet. He did not even utter an incantation.

This one is totally different from the sorcerer before.

The minotaur retreated behind the boulder.

The flaming bullet, however, changed direction and hit it directly in the abdomen.

This enemy could redirect the course of his offensive spells.

Holding in its protruding entrails with its left hand, the minotaur used its right hand to draw out multiple red potions, and it threw them into its mouth, containers and all.

A flurry of spears made of light came flying at the minotaur, completely obliterating the boulder behind which it was hiding.

Every one of this sorcerer's attacks had strength enough to kill.

To make matters worse, he was able to continue firing them repeatedly without any breaks, despite the power of each attack.

While narrowly avoiding death again and again, the minotaur moved from cover to cover, searching for a way to win.

It tried hurling rocks at the sorcerer, but they always vanished with a sizzling sound before reaching him.

The battle continued in that state for a while. Then, the sorcerer formed a ball of lightning around each of his hands and soared into the air.

He can fly?!

The human flew around the cave with incredible speed, circled behind the minotaur's back, and attacked its head with the lightning ball in his right hand.

The minotaur quickly tried to twist out of the way, slashing at this monster with its right ax as it turned.

Its attack did not even graze the sorcerer.

The sorcerer's strike shaved off the minotaur's left horn and the surrounding chunk of its head before gouging a hole in the rock where it landed.

The minotaur swung its axes desperately, but its opponent just floated in the air, easily dodging its attacks without even needing to back up.

The sorcerer attacked again with the lightning ball in his right hand.

The minotaur's left wrist and hand disappeared, along with the ax it was holding.

The sorcerer attacked with the lightning ball in his left hand.

The minotaur's right ax also vanished.

Having lost both its weapons, the minotaur reached into its storage. It needed something that would allow it to hit this opponent.

It pulled out the bracelet the swordsman had left behind.

The minotaur kicked off the rock behind it, jumped at the sorcerer, and swung for his head with the bracelet.

The sorcerer covered his face with his left hand, which was still enveloped by a ball of lightning.

The minotaur's right hand should have melted as soon as it made contact...but that didn't happen.

Instead, the ball of lightning disappeared, as if it had been absorbed.

The bracelet struck the sorcerer's hand and then smashed into his head.

His hand broke, and it sounded like his head cracked.

Propelled by the force of its jump, the minotaur slammed the stump that was now its left arm into the sorcerer's chest.

The sorcerer was thrown backward through the air until he collided with the rock wall behind him, off of which he recoiled before falling facedown on the stone floor.

Not yet.

He's not dead yet.

The balls of lightning around his hands had disappeared, but the minotaur had a feeling his opponent still had the strength to recover and counterattack.

The minotaur leaped at the sorcerer without hesitation and slammed the bracelet into the back of his head.

The sorcerer's head was crushed, and his brains splattered within his hood.

At that moment, a bloodred jewel on a ring the sorcerer was wearing on his right hand began to glow.

The minotaur instinctively held the bracelet in front of its face. The ring released a thin red light, which the bracelet absorbed.

It did not know what that was, but the magic the ring had fired at the minotaur had possessed enough force to kill it.

The minotaur slammed the bracelet into the sorcerer's heart. It then pummeled his entire body with it.

It continued until all that remained was an unrecognizable lump of viscera.

Strangely, no matter how many blows the minotaur delivered, the sorcerer's clothes never tore.

The minotaur heard something move.

It turned toward the sound and was astonished when it saw the sorcerer's left leg.

It had definitely crushed that leg already, but it had swelled back up and was twitching vigorously.

Next, the sorcerer's chest reinflated, and his pulse resumed.

Points all around his body began to wiggle and squirm as if taking on lives of their own.

The sorcerer's body was fighting to resurrect itself.

Where?

Where is the source of his life?

The minotaur then noticed something.

The sorcerer's right hand could not be crushed no matter how many times the minotaur hit it. This was the hand wearing that ring.

The ring was flickering red and black, red and black, at the pace of a heartbeat.

Searching for an effective weapon, the minotaur reached into its storage above its left shoulder with its right hand.

Its fingers brushed against something it instantly recognized as the shortsword the swordsman had left behind.

It withdrew the shortsword and stabbed it into the base of the finger bearing the ring. Both finger and ring were separated from the sorcerer's hand and went flying down the corridor.

The convulsing limbs suddenly stopped moving, and what remained of the body went limp.

Just as the minotaur was just starting to feel relieved, it smelled something burning.

Black smoke was rising from the sorcerer's chest.

Beneath it, a scorch mark in the shape of some kind of ominous creature was growing.

It looked to be a hybrid of human and beast.

Black smoke gushed out of the burn and coalesced into a sinister,

wicked phantom.

It emitted an intense malice and a dense magical aura.

With what could have been hands or tentacles, the ghost reached for the minotaur's head.

It tried to block using its injured left arm, but its forearm instantly rotted upon contact with the ghost.

The minotaur then stabbed the shortsword in its right hand directly through the center of the apparition.

Its hand seethed with pain, and its fingers were melting, but ignoring its own suffering, it continued driving the sword through the ghost.

GRRRRRAAAAAAGGGGHHHH!

The minotaur roared in anguish.

The sword was releasing a light-green phosphorescence.

Then, suddenly, the ghost dispersed into thin air like fog and was gone.

The sorcerer's body disappeared at the same time.

He left behind a staggering amount of loot.

The minotaur splayed itself on the ground.

The pain assaulting it was ferocious.

Its body was changing again. Another massive level-up.

As the agony subsided, all its injuries were healed.

Its missing hand, wrist, horn, and cheek regenerated.

The minotaur felt itself becoming tremendously powerful.

It rested for a bit, then stood up.

It collected every single one of the sorcerer's items and put them in its storage. The level-up had also increased its storage space exponentially.

This time, the clothes the human had been wearing remained as well, so it picked those up, too.

The minotaur wanted to hold on to every single trophy from its victory over such a powerful enemy.

What kind of enemy was that...?

If this room had been any more spacious, I would have died.

If not for the bracelet, I would have died.

If not for the shortsword, I would have died.

If not for the red potions, I would have died.

If not for the knowledge I've gained, I would have died.

Humans are incredible.

They have the ability to become so strong.

That means I can become even stronger as well.

Despite the exhaustion plaguing it, the minotaur felt elated.

After a sufficiently long break, the minotaur resumed its search for staircases so that it could continue its upward exploration.

Its only weapon was a small knife in its right hand. It had lost both its axes during the fight with the sorcerer. It also held in its left hand the bracelet, which could be used as a weapon given its sturdiness.

It encountered multiple humans, but they all ran away without fighting.

Its intuition told it that this was the top floor.

Somewhere on this level was an entrance to another world.

The minotaur reflected back on the labyrinth's structure.

Every floor consisted of corridors and rooms.

The monsters on each floor existed only there and could not traverse floors.

Some monsters wandered the corridors, and some were found in rooms. Each type seemed to prefer one or the other.

Only one boss monster appeared on each floor. They were always in their set room.

Once monsters and bosses were killed, they would reappear after a certain amount of time.

There were two staircases on every floor, each in a different spot. One led up, and the other led down.

The higher the floor, the weaker the monsters.

As the minotaur was walking and thinking, it found a chamber shining with a brighter light than any it had ever seen before.

Over there.

There's a bright light over there.

The world he sought was in that direction.

It would be entirely different from the world the minotaur knew.

The minotaur passed through the entryway.

The first thing it saw was a tiny, squeaking monster getting finished off by a very small human.

If there were other humans present, they surely would have wondered what a child this young was doing in the labyrinth.

The boy quickly collected the bronze coins that appeared when the monster died and put them in the pouch on his belt.

He then looked up and noticed the minotaur.

The tiny monsters squeaked as they ran all around the expansive room, but none of them attacked the boy.

These creatures did not attack unless they felt hostility from their opponent.

There was a small opening at the end of the room, and through it,

the light the minotaur sought was shining brilliantly.

Over there.

That is the entrance to the new world.

The minotaur happened to look down and saw something surprising.

It was the boy.

He was not crying, and he had not collapsed to the ground, either.

Instead, he was glaring at the minotaur, holding his weapon at the ready.

It wasn't much of a weapon. It was an extremely worn-down knife.

But to the young boy, that knife probably felt like a giant ax.

To the minotaur, however, it was nothing more than a thorn.

Why does this one not run?

The weak always run.

You have no chance of defeating me.

The minotaur looked at the small human closely.

He had injuries on his face, his bare arms, and his feet, which were tied up with old rags. His clothes were torn and dripping with blood.

The human was so small that even these puny monsters were strong enemies. They had probably jumped at his face, clung to his body, and nibbled at his hands and feet, but he'd fought them anyway.

For what purpose?

It might have been for those small, round pieces of brown metal.

The minotaur looked into his eyes and finally understood.

I see.

His eyes are the same.

The same as that swordsman.

Those are the eyes of a fighter.

Instinctively, the minotaur lifted the shortsword in its right hand.

And then, surprisingly, the child charged the minotaur.

He ran holding the knife at his hip, which he then thrust into the minotaur's left leg.

The minotaur was astonished by the sluggishness of his movement and the lack of force behind the attack.

Do you really plan to fight me like that?

But he was not a complete novice. The minotaur even saw beauty in the way the boy handled his knife.

While the minotaur watched in amazement, the boy stabbed his knife just above the minotaur's ankle, and the blade pierced its skin.

It actually did more than pierce its skin. Half the blade's width had penetrated the minotaur's leg, and it even cut through muscle. The other half was hidden in its fur, so it looked like the entire knife had disappeared into the minotaur's calf.

The minotaur was stunned.

How had this fragile-looking weapon cut through its thick flesh?

The minotaur didn't know what was going on.

It then felt a strange sensation on its foot.

It looked down to find that the boy had collapsed.

The minotaur did not move, unsure what to make of that.

It heard a soft whistling coming from the boy as he breathed in and out.

Then, the minotaur understood.

This boy had used the last of his stamina on that final attack. He had subsequently lost consciousness and ended up falling asleep, using the toes on the minotaur's left foot as a bed.

The minotaur picked up the child and laid him on top of a rock.

It pulled the knife out of its left leg and set it next to the boy.

This creature had no power, no skill, and lacked a decent weapon.

Nevertheless, he had just performed an impressive attack.

He will undoubtedly continue to fight and grow strong, and eventually, he will become a worthy rival who can entertain me.

The minotaur did not understand the concepts of youth or old age, but it did understand growth. It grew when it defeated enemies. It understood this boy to be a human in an earlier stage of growth. The minotaur believed he would show incredible growth from here on.

The minotaur sensed he would fight this boy again at some point in the future.

It needed to get stronger for that day.

That feeling became something close to conviction and was engraved into the minotaur's heart.

But for now, who is the victor of this battle?

The little one or me?

It pondered this for a while but could not come up with an answer.

There was no doubt the child had just survived a good battle by his standards. A good battle must be rewarded.

The minotaur placed the bracelet it was holding in its left hand on the boy's chest.

It then looked up and faced the light from the exit.

Through there lay this boy's world.

Now that the minotaur beheld that intensely bright light, though, it felt strongly that it did not want to step into it.

That world is not where I belong.

That world will not make me happy, and that world will not be happy to see me.

It turned back in the direction from whence it had come.

Recalling the path it had taken, a map of this floor appeared in its head.

It then realized its head held maps for all the floors it had visited.

My world begins here and continues to the lower floors.

There may be a staircase leading below the floor where I was born.

And then there may be even deeper floors below that.

That has to be the case.

Down, down, down is where my world leads.

The deeper I travel, the stronger the enemies will be.

Strong enemies are my friends, and I must find them.

I will kill all my friends.

That is what the world wants of me, and this is what I want of the world.

The minotaur felt a hunger fiercer than ever before. Experiencing a violent sort of joy, it turned on its heel and strode confidently...

...toward the lower floors.

Chapter 7

The Chief Vassal of House Mercurius

1

Logan was deep in thought.

It had been eight days since the Heavenly Blade entered the labyrinth, and today was the day after his adventurer medal had been discovered.

The appraisal of Percival's dropped items had taken too long to finish the previous day, so work had resumed the next morning. Just a moment ago, Logan had finally been provided with a provisional list.

The items were classified into categories. Just by flipping through the inventory, Logan could tell there were many engraved items. There were a lot of blessed items as well.

If it took two days just to put together the provisional list, it would likely take over a month to assess the total worth of all the items.

The top of Logan's desk was crammed with documents. He was buried neck-deep in cases that required the guild leader's judgment or approval, and he had so much paperwork that he didn't even have time for a lunch break.

He took his eyes off work for a moment in order to process the events of the past few days. While he did, he pulled some preserved foods out of his Bag to munch on.

The previous day, he had been shaken upon hearing news of the Heavenly Blade's death, and he'd arbitrarily decided the heralded adventurer must have been killed by some human's nefarious plot.

But that was jumping to conclusions.

As of this point, he hadn't obtained any information supporting such a theory. He had simply decided there was no way the Heavenly Blade could have been killed by a monster on the sixth floor, so it must not have been a monster that killed him.

But what if he assumed that rogue minotaur had killed the Heavenly Blade?

A few days ago, when he'd started receiving information regarding the creature, Logan had entertained a peculiar thought. To him, the minotaur sounded like a monster adventurer.

The idea was totally absurd, but what would happen if a monster was to become an adventurer?

If it was an adventurer, it would be able to move between the floors.

But is that all?

No, that wasn't the end of it.

If a monster was an adventurer, it would level up when it killed enemies.

It would have leveled up after killing Erina, then again after killing Paja's party, and then...

Logan had a horrifying thought.

If the minotaur killed the Heavenly Blade...

If a series of incredibly unfortunate circumstances led to the Heavenly Blade falling at the hands of the minotaur...

...how strong would the minotaur be now?

Normally, minotaurs were considered to be level 20.

The gray wolves that roamed the same floor were level 10, so the minotaur's level was abnormally high.

If it leveled up once after its battle with Erina, and then two or three more times against Paja's party, and then killed the Heavenly Blade, just how high would its level be now?

Simply thinking about it was terrifying.

But if it was an adventurer, there was probably a limit to how many levels it could gain at once, the same as human adventurers. No matter how strong an enemy a human adventurer killed, they could not advance more than ten levels at a go. An adventurer killing something that would give them ten levels was rare, but that was a known rule.

If you applied that metric to the minotaur, its current level could be around 34 or 35.

That was pretty strong. But put another way, that was roughly equivalent to the strength of the monsters in the corridors of the thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth floors.

At that level, defeating Paja's party would have been difficult, and it wouldn't have been able to touch the Heavenly Blade.

Adventurers gain levels from killing monsters but barely gain any experience from killing other humans.

If the minotaur is an adventurer, how would that rule apply?

While Logan was still racking his brain, unable to reach a satisfying conclusion, the manager cracked open the door to his office.

As always, he was able to open the ill-fitting door without making a sound, which baffled Logan to no end.

“Mr. Logan, the chief vassal of House Mercurius has arrived at the guild. He has a matter he would like to discuss with you and requests a quiet place.”

Logan took a second to process what he’d just heard.

“The chief vassal of House Mercurius”?

A “quiet place”?

A “matter he would like to discuss”?

He could feel himself beginning to sweat.

House Mercurius was quite a renowned family, even in the vast Baldemost Kingdom. A person as important as the chief vassal of that family could not be left waiting.

By a “quiet place,” he surely meant somewhere they would not be overheard. Which meant his office was the only option.

“Eador, please show him in.”

Logan had signed his approval for the Heavenly Blade’s adventurer medal and a notice detailing the collection of his dropped items to be sent to House Mercurius along with the provisional inventory. He had taken care of that earlier that day.

Which meant they had not yet contacted the family.

Logan would have understood why they were here if they had received notice of the Heavenly Blade’s death and then come to the guild to confirm it. However, the guild had not yet sent that dispatch.

What’s more, I would’ve expected them to summon me there. Why is the chief vassal visiting me directly?

The bell outside his office clattered loudly.

Logan never expected that bell would actually be used. It was installed as a joke to tease him for being a “big shot” as the leader of the guild.

There was no lock on the inside, so the manager opened the door halfway from the corridor and spoke in an eloquent voice.

“Master Pan’ja Raban and his attendant Master Julius of House Zelger are here to see you.”

Wait a second.

Two people?

“House Zelger”?

Isn’t that...?

Logan had seen that name in the documents he’d received from the last guild leader.

It was a special family name. There were several used in this manner.

Anyone bearing it was a person of that lineage.

Just what is going on here?!

The first to enter the room was a man bordering on old age.

He was tall. His hair and beard were groomed neatly, and his clothes were elegant. He projected a sense of calm in his movements and the way he walked.

Logan's trained eye could tell this chief vassal had the strength of a mighty warrior.

"It is an honor to receive such noble guests as yourselves. I am Logan, leader of the Micaene Adventurers Guild."

Logan stepped out from behind his desk and bowed deeply.

"I am Pan'ja Raban, chief vassal of House Mercurius."

Chief vassals took charge of the family's business affairs and acted as representatives for the head of the family.

The heads of House Mercurius throughout history were all well-known for their love for their vassals. They were given opportunities to build up experience and then eventually granted households of their own. Chief vassals were richly rewarded for their dedication.

For that reason, the families descended from former vassals all revered House Mercurius and showed unwavering loyalty throughout many generations.

They also treated their relatives very well.

Yet, despite his powerful and wealthy position, the head of House Mercurius never let himself laze in his wealth.

For that reason, if problems arose, the relatives of House Mercurius and the houses of their former vassals would all go to war as one. House Mercurius did not have a lot of land, but their potential military might was seen as foremost in the country.

The chief vassal managed all the family's business when the head of House Mercurius was away, and when the head of the family was home, the position took care of various matters as a representative. House Mercurius had dispatched soldiers twice in the last two years, and Logan had heard that the chief vassal had been given command.

As such, this man should have been a person of high social status, but Logan could not remember ever seeing his or his family's name.

He should be the son of a distinguished lineage, but his identity is a total mystery.

Pondering the chief vassal's mysterious background and studying his face, hardened by age, made Logan recall a certain event.

As for why the chief vassal reminded him of this story, even Logan himself was unsure.

3

In a bygone era, two kings ago, there was a man who received an unusual promotion. He went from an average soldier of the Imperial Guard to an official inspection officer.

Feeling the favor of the king, he worked diligently at his duty.

After exposing a number of households for illegal trade with foreign countries, however, he incurred the wrath of the Duke of Riga, and his entire family was to be put to the sword.

The man, his relatives, and even his subordinates all vanished overnight.

The next morning, the Duke of Riga visited the palace and brazenly reported in front of the king and his cabinet the extermination of traitors, recounting the man's crime in great detail. His accusations were absurd, but because he had already killed him and his entire family, there was nothing that could be done.

The king's face turned purple, and he rose from his chair without a word.

There was a certain rumor at the time.

The person who had inspected the corpse of the man's second-oldest son reported that he thought it was him, but his facial features appeared slightly off.

There were those who put forth the theory that a noble friend of the man had replaced the second son with a look-alike and was sheltering him.

The previous guild leader firmly believed that the second son had survived.

4

Was this chief vassal the second son, who had lived until this very day?

The massacre of House Vald had occurred in the year 1024 of the Royal Calendar, which was fifty-five years ago. That lined up with the chief vassal's apparent age.

This was, of course, just a hunch of Logan's. He had no proof to back his suspicions.

He just felt like he could see into this man's heart.

The one accompanying the chief vassal, as if being watched over by him, was a boy who looked to be five or six years old.

So this young boy is Julius Zelger.

Zelger was a peculiar name. Despite it being clearly recorded in many ledgers at the royal court, there weren't actually any noble families in the kingdom with that name.

It was likely not the boy's real family name.

He had chestnut hair and blue eyes. His clothes were not very fancy, but they were made of high-quality material. He appeared both innocent and dignified at the same time, and he was quite handsome besides.

Given the chief vassal's behavior, it seemed he was the boy's attendant, rather than the other way around.

Logan waited for a moment, but the young boy's introduction did not come.

Logan determined that the boy did want to be introduced at this time, and he motioned for them to sit on the sofa.

The chief vassal let the boy sit first, then took his place next to him.

"You should sit as well, Mr. Logan."

"Thank you very much."

It's been a long time since I've met with a genuine noble.

Logan was feeling more than a little nervous.

The manager walked into the room, trailed by two female employees.

These ladies were carrying the guests' overcoats and hats.

With conduct so composed as to come off as annoying, the manager hung the coats and hats on the rack and moved to vacate the room, with the employees following behind him.

"Eador. Until you hear from me, don't let anyone come up to this floor."

The manager looked at Logan, nodding to show his understanding. He then gave a deep bow in front of the door before taking his leave. It was an extremely graceful and proper gesture.

By the gods, are you a butler for a royal family or something?

Though the man was getting on his nerves, Logan did feel a little grateful for the manager's good upbringing, even if his behavior made him a target of ridicule most of the time.

In truth, Eador had served a rather large noble family and was himself from a noble family. One thing had led to another, and he'd ended up working at the Adventurers Guild.

After Logan sensed that everyone had gone downstairs, the chief vassal of House Mercurius spoke up.

"Mr. Logan. Apologies for the sudden visit. I came here today because I have something I want to discuss with you. Before that, however, I must introduce Lord Julius. Before we entered your office, he was announced with his mother's family name. Julius inherited that house through her."

The chief vassal was explaining this all clearly and politely, but Logan was having trouble wrapping his head around what he was saying.

He inherited that name from his mother?

Then that means she must be...

“But Lord Julius’s sacred duty lies with the splendid House Mercurius, one of the twenty-four families who followed the founding king. He is the son and legitimate heir of Percival Kone Dou La Mercurius Mathus, the current head of the family.”

Heir?

Son?

Which means...

“He’s the Heavenly Blade’s son?! Wait, *he was married* ?!?!”

After shouting with surprise, Logan realized his rudeness, and his face turned pale.

“Uh, s-sorry about that. Please pardon my sudden outburst,” Logan said, bowing his head so deeply, it brushed the table. The chief vassal smiled.

“Mr. Logan. You have no need to humble yourself. Nobles have their own etiquette, and adventurers have theirs. This is the Adventurers Guild’s domain. We are nothing more than outsiders. In addition...”

The chief vassal searched for the right words and continued.

“For Lord Percival, who is an adventurer himself, the Adventurers Guild is a supporter and a protector. I hear that you in particular, Mr. Logan, have been a good friend to Lord Percival. He always speaks of the comfort of the Micaene guild. The reason that wayward wanderer spends so much time here in Micaene is because of the labyrinth and because of you, Mr. Logan, and we owe you our thanks, for when he spends time in Micaene, he is able to come home.”

Julius, sitting next to the chief vassal, was staring at Logan with sparkling eyes.

Please don’t look at me like that.

“Our lord left the estate seven days ago to enter the Sazardon Labyrinth. He informed me he was going to explore around the ninety-fourth floor. He prepared plenty of supplies but only enough to last for ten days at the longest.”

That was an irregularly short amount of time. Ten days should not have been nearly enough time to even reach the ninety-fourth floor, let alone make the return trip.

Logan had once asked the Heavenly Blade about how he moved through the labyrinth so quickly, and he’d answered that he possessed items both to hide his presence from enemies and to exponentially increase his running speed. He did not, however, tell him what kind of blessed items he used to achieve those effects.

“Lord Percival has a crystal ball that displays his life force. It is a habit of Lord Julius’s to open the box in which this crystal ball is kept and check it once or twice per day. Yesterday morning, it appeared perfectly normal. In the afternoon, however, the light in the crystal ball was gone.”

Julius looked like he was beginning to cry.

Logan’s heart wept for the boy.

“Lord Percival always said that the day may come when he dies in the labyrinth and that if he dies in the labyrinth, his body will vanish. We knew from the moment the crystal ball’s light went out that Lord Percival had perished, but now Lord Julius must inherit the house and his father’s position.”

Julius was fighting back tears.

I’m sure it was a shock when he saw the light had gone out.

He probably spent the whole day crying.

“Mr. Logan. I beg of you to tell us anything you may have heard regarding the whereabouts of our lord.”

“Chief vassal. Truthfully, I was just about to deliver a letter before you arrived. Please wait a moment.”

Logan rang a bell. Before the chime ended, the manager came up from the floor below.

He was holding a tray in both hands, his face totally expressionless. He was followed by an employee carrying tea.

The tray bore a letter addressed to House Mercurius, the list of personal effects, and a copy of the rules for how recovered items were handled.

He courteously handed the chief vassal a receipt, as well as a pen to sign it.

How could he have prepared this so quickly and perfectly?!

And why is that tea so fresh?!

The manager took the receipt after the chief vassal signed it, set the tea on the table in the proper order, and then quickly left the room, closing the poorly fitting door without a sound.

The chief vassal read the documents in silence.

As if just noticing the tea, he gestured for Julius to have some. The boy reached for the cup, brought it to his mouth, took a sip, and then put it back down on his saucer.

With that, the other two could now drink.

Logan gratefully quenched his parched throat.

He then began reading a copy of the list that was on his desk.

After the chief vassal marked the inventory with a variety of symbols, he returned the documents to the reception table, closed his eyes to think, and then finally opened them and faced Julius.

“Lord Julius. Lord Percival’s belongings were discovered yesterday

by an adventurer passing through the sixth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. They are currently being held by this guild.”

Julius nodded.

“Mr. Logan. I want to buy back some of his items.”

Logan suddenly felt a rush of anger that the Heavenly Blade’s holy occupation was adventurer.

If he had been a knight instead, he would have had a Treasury instead of a Bag. Treasuries enabled sharing and even inheritance, which meant the situation with his belongings would be no issue.

That said, there were many skills adventurers learned that were necessary for going through the labyrinth solo, not the least of which was the Map skill. Bags were also much more convenient than Treasuries when it came to retrieving items.

Logan looked at both Julius and the chief vassal and apologized.

“If a death occurs in the outside world, the items left behind all go to the bereaved family. Well, unless there is a will specifying a separate destination for their possessions. When it comes to the labyrinth, though, the rules are different.”

As the dryness returned to his throat, he took another sip of tea and continued.

“The lost items of those who die in the labyrinth become the property of the person who found them and of the guild. Even if there was a will, it would not apply to items found in the labyrinth. For that reason, valuable property is typically not brought into the labyrinth. This amount of wealth suddenly becoming the property of someone else is no doubt frustrating, but I ask for your understanding.”

“I am familiar with this process. This is a rule of labyrinths that is recognized by national law, and I understand why things have to be this way. I do not think of it as our property being stolen. This amount will also have no effect on our overall finances. Furthermore, Lord Percival left his best weapons and items with Lord Julius. He did not bring anything precious into the labyrinth. There were, however, five exceptions.”

The chief vassal took a sip of tea and continued.

“These are all blessed items and were very helpful to Lord Percival on his adventures. Those five items possess particularly special meaning to our family, Mr. Logan.” The chief vassal stared fixedly at Logan. “Lord Percival spoke of you as a man with great judgment. I want to speak frankly with you.”

The Heavenly Blade said that?

You sure you’re not confusing me for someone else?

While Logan had his doubts, there was nothing for him to do but to nod.

“First, I want to buy back the three items I have marked on this

list.”

Logan looked at the list.

Raika’s Ring.

Ende’s Shield.

Bolton’s Charm.

These were all names he had never heard before, and according to the list, they were all blessed items. The effect of their blessings was unknown, but the guild’s inspector said they were items of the highest order.

“Understood. The bereaved family has priority in choosing which items to buy back. There will be no problem there. Mind, we can’t give you a clear estimate until our assessment is complete.”

“The cost does not matter to me. Now, on to the problem.”

As they were talking, Logan noticed something.

That item was not on the list.

There was no doubt the Heavenly Blade had been carrying it. That famous bracelet.

“If there were items Lord Percival had with him but are not on this list, what does that mean? Alestra’s Bracelet and Kaldan’s Dagger are missing.”

5

“Mr. Logan. Lord Percival always said that if he was killed in the labyrinth, he did not want us to resent the opponent who killed him. He insisted he was entering the labyrinth of his own free will and that every fight was a duel of honor. Even if he were to be killed due to a lack of strength, he would be satisfied and did not want to pass on to his son hatred or a grudge. He expressed that wish to me many times. For that reason, I have no desire to investigate the cause of his death or the circumstances under which it happened.”

He thought of fighting monsters in the labyrinth as a duel of honor...

That definitely sounds like something the Heavenly Blade would say.

“But as things are right now, Lord Julius cannot succeed his father. There will be no problem with his claim to the position as head of our house being recognized. It is what will come afterward that is the problem.”

“Could Lord Julius’s mother not act as an intermediary with the king?”

The chief vassal looked at Logan with surprise.

“You know of her family name. I’m surprised.”

“I believe it’s the maiden name of the previous king’s second queen

and belongs to a family subordinate to the throne. I have heard that the second queen's mother would sneak out of the castle sometimes to serve as a messenger."

"Your intel and memory are both very impressive."

Actually, it was the Micaene guild that was impressive. Most of the credit for that went to the previous guild leader.

"Lord Percival and his wife married in secret. Their marriage is official, but steps were taken to prevent his wife's noble lineage and privilege from being used against their children."

Hearing that Percival had married a princess of the royal family in secret was certainly surprising, but from what Logan knew about the second queen of the previous king, he could understand why they'd kept it under wraps.

"I would ask you not to repeat this to anyone, but the king was exceedingly pleased by their marriage."

It was said that the current king hated the second queen of his predecessor. Nevertheless, the chief vassal now claimed the king was delighted by the marriage of her daughter. And he wanted Logan to keep even that a secret. There must have been a reason.

"That being the case, receiving imperial sanction and recognition of Julius's new position from the king will not be a problem. The difficulty will come afterward. At the time of his succession, he will be asked to visit the palace for an audience with the king. The heads of our house have a custom of wearing that bracelet for the occasion."

That's right!

When a new head of House Mercurius assumes the post, they visit the royal palace wearing Alestra's Bracelet.

"His Majesty then takes the bracelet in his hands and praises the promise of ruler and servant made between the founding king and the first head of the house. It's just a formality, but our family will lose face if we do not have the bracelet."

Alestra's Bracelet was a treasure known even in other countries. It had been bestowed upon the founding king by the goddess Pharah, and the king had granted the treasure to the first head of House Mercurius. If they lost it, it could mean losing much more than face. It could threaten the very existence of House Mercurius.

"Accordingly, until the bracelet returns, we cannot give notice of Lord Percival's death, and we cannot apply for Lord Julius's succession. If Kaldan's Dagger is not found, we can give up for now and try again another time. The same cannot be said if we fail to recover Alestra's Bracelet."

Now it was Logan's turn to think.

After a bit of time, he spoke.

"Let's consider the order of events. The dropped items were

discovered by the sixth-floor staircase. Many people pass through that area, but no one reported seeing Lord Percival, which suggests to me he couldn't have been there for long. It is likely his expedition continued to the deeper floors, and then once he was finished, he began climbing back up through the labyrinth to return to the entrance, then lost his life on the sixth floor. So the question becomes what happened to the bracelet and shortsword when he reached the sixth floor."

"Hmm. It is as you say. Stealing those two precious items from Lord Percival while he was alive would have been impossible. He also definitely would not have lost them. Given that they are imbued with very special blessings, it is difficult to imagine they could have been damaged or destroyed."

"I agree with all those points. Looking at the list, I can see he still had a great number of highly effective recovery items left. If he suffered injuries or was poisoned on the deeper floors, he would have had time to heal. Which means he definitely lost his life on the sixth floor. It's best to assume that someone took them either at the time of death or afterward."

Logan's conclusion was correct, but there was something he did not know.

In order to heighten the effects of his training, Percival had done his best to avoid using recovery items. He'd equipped boots on the forty-ninth floor to intentionally lower his strength and abilities for the same purpose.

When he'd encountered the minotaur, his stamina and energy were nearly spent, meaning he was fighting with a severe handicap.

"You are probably right. I know this is impolite of me to ask, but did the finder submit all the items to the guild?"

"Yes, everything found was submitted. At least, that's what those who discovered them think. By the way, I assume these two items have seals of ownership?"

"Correct."

"And I assume they are of the highest order?"

"Correct. They are engraved with elite seals, and summoning magic has been cast on them as well. That is true for all five items I wish to see returned. The answer to your next question is yes. Yesterday, I already called an engraver and had him perform a technique to locate the items. In the evening, we began receiving responses from all the items except for the two currently missing. I had him continue tracking the traceable items, and it seemed they were taken to the guild. That is why we came here today."

Well, isn't this man shrewd.

He already knew all that beforehand and questioned me anyway.

So they even used summoning magic...

Summoning magic was a technique that consumed an amount of silver equal to the weight of the item you were casting it on, and its effect could last up to a year.

They're probably recasting it every time the effect wears off.

It seems you don't need the actual item present to do so.

I had heard they don't have much money, considering their social standing, but sure enough, they're still much richer than I can possibly imagine.

"That must mean that the bracelet and the shortsword are still in the Sazardon Labyrinth."

Logan didn't know much about engraving magic, but it was common knowledge that you couldn't search the inside of a labyrinth from outside.

"I also cannot think of any other possibilities."

"Indeed. In order to avoid trouble when recovered items are submitted to the guild, we ask a number of questions while using magic to detect lies, with the permission of the finder. One of those questions is whether or not all recovered items were submitted. We have confirmation from all nineteen people that every item was surrendered. For that reason, there is no chance any of them concealed the bracelet or the shortsword within the labyrinth."

"I see."

"Another routine question is whether the finder was involved in the owner's death or if they have any idea of who might have been. Not a single one of the nineteen knew anything about Lord Percival's death."

"Understood."

"I also think it best to put aside the possibility that anyone else passed by and took the bracelet or the shortsword. Anyone finding dropped items in the labyrinth can receive either their pick of the items or monetary compensation if they bring them directly to the guild, as long as they did not harm the original owner. Since a wealth of money and expensive consumables were left behind, we can also rule out robbery, looting, or any motive driven by simple profit."

"I would agree. So what are the remaining possibilities?"

"First is the chance that the finders simply didn't see them or dropped them on the way out of the labyrinth. In that case, the items would currently be somewhere between the first and sixth floors. Next, we can't deny the possibility that a monster grabbed the items before the adventurers arrived. Monsters have a tendency to be attracted to weapons or to shiny objects."

"I had not thought of that."

"In that case, they would be on the sixth floor. Monsters cannot travel between floors, so one would not have been able to carry them

anywhere else. Next, and I apologize for even suggesting this, there is the possibility that an individual wishing harm upon House Mercurius set a trap for Lord Percival, stole the two treasures, and is now hiding somewhere in the labyrinth.”

The chief vassal’s eyes narrowed.

“They could wait until the death of Lord Percival became widely enough known that you had no choice but to go ahead and apply for the succession of Lord Julius. They could be doing this to drive House Mercurius into a dilemma, perhaps with the intention of returning the bracelet with some condition attached. No matter how likely this may seem, however, I believe it to be impossible.”

“Oh? I’ve been impressed by your insight, but what makes you so confident in that assertion?”

“Regardless of how experienced an adventurer is, how perfectly a balanced team they’ve formed, or how many items they’ve prepared, a labyrinth is not a place you can disappear into for an extended period of time. It is impossible to hide in a way that no one can find you.”

“Hmm. Considering you have become a dragonslayer twice, I will trust your judgment.”

“That said, they could not have left the labyrinth, either. Anyone could tell by looking at those items that they are engraved with elite seals, which means they cannot be hidden in a Bag. The culprit would be discovered the moment they left the labyrinth. That is, unless they somehow managed to sneak out and enter a different labyrinth.”

“That has not happened. We have two engravers monitoring the items around the clock.”

“You’ve been very thorough. As soon as the perpetrators left the labyrinth, an elite engraver would detect them, even if they used teleportation magic to escape to the ends of the continent. If anyone has stolen the items, they should understand that much, but they are likely unaware of the summoning magic. They could be planning on trying something with the bracelet... No, that’s impossible.”

“It is as you say. That bracelet has a special restriction bestowed by the goddess. Its effect will only work for the head of the house or someone the head of the house has approved in their heart.”

“What? That’s the first time I’ve ever heard that second part. Well, in any case, it is well-known that other people can’t use it, and because the history of the seal of ownership cannot be erased, selling it is also not an option.”

“That’s correct.”

“Intentionally taking items you are unable to use or sell while ignoring all the other expensive and useful items there, then hiding in the labyrinth even though it’s obvious you’ll eventually be found makes no sense at all. No matter how you look at it, it’s not something

any sensible person would do.”

Logan added to himself that nobles did nonsensical things all the time, but he elected not to share that comment. Had he known the chief vassal was thinking the same thing, he surely would have burst out laughing.

“So what do you think happened?”

“As of this moment, we cannot say for sure. We just don’t have a clear idea, so we’re keeping in mind a variety of possibilities that I want to eliminate one by one.”

“Could you talk us through those possibilities?”

“First, Lord Percival may have dropped the bracelet on a deeper floor in an area with a group of unexpectedly strong monsters, and judging that retrieving it on his own would be difficult, he decided to go ahead and travel back up. Then, something unusual happened that cost him his life. In this case, the bracelet would be somewhere on the bottom ten floors.”

“Hmm. Next?”

“Someone has the items and is hiding. If this is true, they would do so on as deep a floor as possible.”

“I see. That would make sense.”

“The next possibility is that, after Lord Percival lost his life on the sixth floor, either a monster took them or the finders dropped them on the way out of the labyrinth, which would put them somewhere on the first six floors.”

“Hmm.”

“Next—and this one is extremely unlikely—but someone could have taken the items and then teleported directly out of the labyrinth into a different one and is currently hiding there.”

“What? Isn’t it impossible to teleport from one labyrinth into another?”

“It is not impossible. I know a sorcerer capable of it.”

“Huh.”

“I do not know of any other sorcerer with a similar ability, but as there is one, I can’t deny there could be another.”

“HmMMM.”

After recounting the various scenarios to this point, their best course of action became clear.

They would have to take an engraver and descend to the sixth floor. You could not probe the labyrinth from outside, but if you entered, you could probe whatever floor you occupied.

“Where are those two engravers now?”

“One of them is resting at the estate. The other is waiting on us in our carriage.”

“I see you’ve come prepared.”

Now that they were about to head for the labyrinth, Logan remembered something. Namely, what was happening in the labyrinth right now.

“Chief vassal. Allow me to share with you a bit of information we have collected.”

Logan told him about the strange minotaur. He then explained how Gil Linx had left to perform a search to unravel the mystery around the deaths of the party of three and Percival.

The chief vassal remained silent for a long time.

He then said exactly what Logan had anticipated.

“Mr. Logan. If Gil Linx is investigating the labyrinth, I realize it would be best for us to await his return. This may be selfish of me, but I still want to go ahead and try searching as far as the sixth floor accompanied by the engraver. Can I ask you to prepare us a guide and authorize this search?”

“I thought you would say that. The guild has no right to decide whether someone can enter the labyrinth. That especially goes for those who aren’t adventurers. As for a guide and escort, I’ll have you know there is a perfectly suitable S-rank adventurer right here.”

Logan pointed to himself and smiled broadly.

Chapter 8

Into the Depths

1

“Mr. Logan. Would you mind if I changed my clothes here?”

“H-huh? Yeah, go ahead.”

The chief vassal of House Mercurius gave a slight bow to his lord, took off his jacket and pants, pulled light armor out of his Bag, and put it on skillfully.

A Bag!

Is he a former adventurer?

No. There's no way. This man is a noble to the core.

I highly doubt that, as a noble and a knight, he went out of his way to choose adventurer as his holy occupation.

Hey, this is no time to get lost in thought.

“Allow me to change as well.”

Logan bowed slightly toward Julius and Pan'ja, and then he also put his clothes into his Bag and pulled out and equipped leather armor.

Pan'ja grabbed his overcoat and hat hanging on the rack and stored those, too. He then grabbed Julius's overcoat and got him ready to depart.

2

House Mercurius's carriage was parked in front of the guild. There were knights stationed next to it. They seemed quite capable.

“Please ride with us, Mr. Logan.”

“Actually, the labyrinth is just over there, so I'm going to walk.”

“I see.”

Once the boy and the chief vassal got into their conveyance, Logan began guiding them on foot. The knights followed diagonally behind without a word. He brought them to a location near the entrance to the labyrinth where the carriage would not get in anyone's way.

The chief vassal and a man who looked like a sorcerer descended from the carriage. The coachman did not move from his seat, and the knights stationed themselves next to the doors. Julius would be waiting here.

“Mr. Logan. This man’s name is Skant. He is an engraver, but he also knows some offensive and defensive magic.”

“That puts me at ease.”

The chief vassal drew a longsword from his Bag and fixed it to his hip.

He has an impressive dignity about him.

He’s probably on the high end of A rank.

No, maybe S rank.

Logan drew a war hammer from his Bag.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“All right.”

Logan walked toward the entrance. The chief vassal followed behind him diagonally, and the engraver trailed Pan’ja. Logan wasn’t sure why, but he felt a strange sense of unity as they moved toward the labyrinth.

With this trio, forget the sixth floor. We could probably make it to the ninetieth floor.

My heart is racing for the first time in years.

“Hey!”

The engraver suddenly raised his voice. Someone had emerged from the labyrinth. Whoever it was seemed small.

What is a child this little doing here?

Anyone could enter the first floor of the labyrinth, even without a holy occupation. As a result, people with nowhere else to turn for money sometimes raided the first floor for the purpose of collecting bronze coins. Those people usually died.

The monsters of the first floor, spiny rats, attacked enemies who projected hostility toward them. People inexperienced in combat did not know how to direct their aggression, which resulted in them being swarmed by countless rats and nibbled to death.

In Micaene, it was common for parents when scolding their children to threaten to throw them into the first floor of the labyrinth if they didn’t behave.

While Logan was puzzling over what this kid could have been doing there, the engraver ran up to the child.

The boy had black eyes and black hair and looked to be around seven or eight years old. He was covered in dirt and injuries all over his body and face. He had a worn-down knife in his right hand and a bracelet in his left.

“This is it! This is it!” yelled the engraver after he ran to the kid.

Logan and the chief vassal both walked up to join them.

Oh?

Even though we've aggressively crowded this kid, he isn't the least bit scared.

The chief vassal bent down and looked the child in the eyes.

"I'm sorry to ask this of you, but could you show me that bracelet?"

The boy handed it over straightaway.

The chief vassal looked at it for some time. He then returned the bracelet to the kid, stood up, and signaled to their carriage. One of the knights brought Julius over.

The chief vassal bowed to his young lord.

"This boy has Alestra's Bracelet."

Julius's eyes lit up.

The chief vassal got down on one knee, looked the boy in the eyes again, and spoke.

"I am Pan'ja Raban. What is your name?"

"I'm Panzel."

He wasn't the least bit timid, but he was well-mannered. Logan saw the chief vassal's lips curl into a slight smile.

"Did you obtain this bracelet in the labyrinth?"

"Yes."

"Could you share with me how you came to claim it?"

"My mother is sick, so I went into the first floor of the labyrinth to find some bronze coins. This was my third time today."

Third time!

If that's true, then he did not survive by chance. This boy knows how to direct his hostility toward the spiny rats he wants to fight while avoiding the rest.

"The second spiny rat I killed today dropped two bronze coins. I gathered them, and when I looked up, it was right in front of me."

"What was right in front of you?"

"A monster. It was huge. And it had the body of a human and the head of a bull with giant horns."

"That sounds like a minotaur."

"Really? I don't know what that is, but it was holding a shortsword in its right hand and this bracelet in its left hand."

"A shortsword and this bracelet... So what happened next?"

"I thought that if I didn't fight, I was going to die, so I attacked it with my knife."

"Huh?"

He attacked it?!

Even with a regular minotaur, most people would wet themselves if they saw one in person.

This minotaur is obviously a unique monster. And the boy says he

attacked it?!

“At my height, I could only reach about this high on its leg.” The boy tapped his own calf with the bracelet. “But then I passed out because I’d used up all my strength.”

“What? Right in front of the minotaur?”

“When I woke up, I was lying on top of a flat boulder, and this bracelet was on my stomach. It looked expensive, so I was wondering if I could sell it. Then, when I left the labyrinth, you all came up to me.”

That seemed like the end of the kid’s story.

“Because you obtained this bracelet in the labyrinth, in accordance with the rules, it is now yours. However, this bracelet is a prized possession of this boy’s father and a treasure of our family. I would like to give you a suitable price for it. How does that sound?”

The boy named Panzel looked back into the chief vassal’s eyes, then looked at Julius.

“This bracelet belongs to your father?”

Julius nodded and said yes. Julius was slightly bigger than Panzel and probably older, too. Panzel seemed more mature, though.

“All right, you can have it. I don’t need any money.”

Panzel held out the bracelet for Julius. Julius smiled from ear to ear and took the bracelet.

“Thank you, Mr. Panzel.”

The chief vassal gave Logan a look, directed him to a spot slightly away from the others, and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Mr. Logan. The bracelet has been returned to us. You have my gratitude for your assistance.”

“What? But I didn’t do anything.”

“Following your advice is what led to this result, so clearly, your insight had value. Now that we have the bracelet back, I need to return to the estate right away and give my report.”

He was probably reporting to the Heavenly Blade’s wife and Julius’s mother, a princess of royal blood.

“I understand. That would be best.”

“I’m sure many adventurers are already aware of Lord Percival’s death.”

“Actually, no. We do not inform adventurers who recover items in the labyrinth of the identity of the person who dropped them. I’ve sworn the guild employees to silence. The death of Lord Percival will become a major event, so it would be problematic for us if it turned out we were wrong.”

“I never would have expected you to go that far. I am greatly obliged.”

“With this kind of case, however, rumors will gradually spread. It’s

obvious the owner of those items was someone of high social standing. There aren't many adventurers among the nobility, so I'm sure a number of people will surmise the victim's identity."

"That I don't mind. I will just be grateful if the guild does not officially report the death of Lord Percival."

No matter how far a rumor spreads, it remains a rumor. If the guild officially recognized the Heavenly Blade's death, and the royal court became aware of it, that would put House Mercurius in a difficult position.

"That will be no problem, but I'll need to tell the finders that a noble has made a proposal to buy back some of the items. I'll omit your name."

"Mr. Logan. I will notify those within the family that Lord Percival died of illness. I will then get started on preparations so that Lord Julius can assume his post as head of the family without issue."

"I see. Got it. The Micaene Adventurers Guild will never officially recognize that Lord Percival died in the labyrinth."

"Thank you very much." The chief vassal bowed deeply and continued speaking. "Tomorrow, I am going to send two vassals. The engraver Skant will be with them. I would like to request some adventurers to guide them to the sixth floor."

"Understood."

Logan had heard from the Heavenly Blade himself that in order to avoid attending official functions and visiting the palace, he would say he was ill as an excuse, and it seemed on paper that Percival was officially a sickly man. His habit of holing himself away in the labyrinth was probably common knowledge at the palace, though.

3

The chief vassal asked Panzel where he lived and about his lifestyle. He thanked him again for the bracelet and then handed him a silver coin, which he said represented a promise.

He asked Panzel why he'd said he didn't need any money, and Panzel answered, "If something my father owned became someone else's, I would be sad." Logan wondered if the boy had experienced that kind of thing before.

Regardless, whatever the chief vassal was planning, Logan didn't think he would harm the boy.

Logan then made some arrangements, separated from the group, and went back to the guild. When he returned to his office, he was greeted by that mountain of documents crowding his desk, taunting

him for the amount of work he still had left to do.

If I'm not here, have the manager do it. He should be able to handle 80 percent of this just fine.

It took him until late into the night to finish everything. When he arrived at work the next morning, a messenger from House Mercurius was waiting for him.

The messenger had a list of the items House Mercurius wanted to buy back. The chief vassal seemed to have decided that he wanted nearly everything, aside from the consumables.

Julius probably asked him to buy back all his father's stuff.

They even attached an offer, put forward without waiting for the assessment to be completed. It was a higher price than the guild likely would have asked. That may have been a message to the guild, saying to just forget about this bothersome process and go ahead and let them buy the items back.

This is an incredible amount of money they're offering. The recipients will have nothing to complain about.

Raika's Ring, Ende's Shield, and Bolton's Charm had especially staggering prices attached, but Logan wondered if the prices might still be low, considering their true worth.

Ende...

Ende...

I feel like I've heard that somewhere before.

Hold on.

Wasn't that the name of a dragon god worshipped in the eastern part of the Gorenza Empire?

The two knights and the engraver from House Mercurius arrived at the promised time, and Logan introduced them to two veteran scouts he had standing by for them. The chief vassal had agreed to pay as if they were being escorted to the middle levels, so he'd been able to find adventurers to take the job in no time.

After seeing them off, he turned back to the mountain of documents but, having too much on his mind, couldn't focus on work.

From Panzel's testimony, he could definitely assume the minotaur had had Alestra's Bracelet. It was strange, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If the minotaur had obtained the bracelet, there could be no doubt that it had killed Percival.

The shortsword the minotaur had been holding had most likely been Kaldan's Dagger. It was very hard to imagine a minotaur holding a shortsword instead of axes.

Logan spent so long pondering the matter that evening fell before he knew it, and the House Mercurius knights returned to the guild to make their report. They'd ended up searching down to the eleventh floor but said they had found no engraved items.

“Has Mr. Gil Linx shared anything about his investigation?”

“Not yet. It seemed like he had business at the royal palace, so he probably just hasn’t had time to come back here. If he says anything, I’ll contact the chief vassal.”

“Thank you very much.”

They said they’d placed flowers on the sixth floor under Julius’s orders.

So in the end, they still understood nothing about Percival’s death. Not one thing had been solved definitively.

At the very least, Logan could take solace in the fact that the minotaur seemed to attack humans only on rare occasions. The overwhelming number of eyewitness testimonies more than confirmed this. Even Panzel, who’d attacked the minotaur himself, had not been harmed.

But a minotaur that didn’t attack people was quite bizarre.

Anyway, fretting about it wouldn’t get him anywhere. All he could do was be patient.

“Now seems like as good a time as any...”

Logan grabbed some alcohol off a shelf and opened a drawer to get a glass.

The Serruria shell was sitting right next to it. He’d been so busy that he hadn’t even thought to check it. There was no way Gil was going to die, so doing so would have been a waste of time.

But Logan froze when he opened the drawer. The Serruria shell was there, but the bluish-purple light that represented Gil’s life force had gone out.

Logan was rendered speechless. He tried to pick up the shell with his trembling hands but ended up shattering it instead.

He felt like his world was falling apart.

4

Pan’ja Raban’s heart sang with glee.

He was grief-stricken over Percival’s death, but Percival had been so brilliant and larger-than-life that an ordinary man such as Pan’ja could not even begin to guess at his way of thinking.

There were many who saw Percival as a boorish noble who could do nothing but fight. Those people didn’t understand the first thing about him. Percival actually had a brilliant mind and superb political acumen, to the point where he may have been the smartest noble in the country. After much deliberation, though, Percival had chosen a road that did not make use of those abilities, instead following a path

he thought would keep the country at peace.

Exploring labyrinths was a hobby of Percival's and a cover. He had lived and died doing what he loved, so he had probably been satisfied in the end. Besides, Percival had not been someone Pan'ja had to spend time worrying about and protecting.

Pan'ja's most important mission was training the vassals who would support Julius. Their men were quite skilled and excelled in a number of different areas—some were useful for their knowledge and wisdom, others for their combat prowess. Together, they were beginning to add up to more than the sum of their parts. Looking at their vassals as a whole, however, he had felt that something was missing.

Then he met the boy named Panzel.

The boy was still young. Pan'ja did not yet know what kind of talents he would develop, but he had a hunch this boy was the one for whom he had been searching.

Pan'ja had been bewildered when he'd heard that Alestra's Bracelet was not among Percival's dropped items. There was no way Percival would have allowed himself to lose the bracelet, knowing the dilemma that would cause his son.

It was his belief in Percival that convinced Pan'ja that his deceased lord had given Panzel the bracelet and sent him to the entrance of the labyrinth. That Percival, who'd so loved the labyrinth, had found the boy. The bracelet was proof.

Just from speaking with him briefly, Pan'ja could tell the child had great character. Consequently, he found himself heading to Panzel's house to meet with his mother and to invite the boy to serve House Mercurius as a vassal.

Panzel turned out to not be home. His mother was the only one there. She got out of bed and welcomed Pan'ja inside. After the chief vassal introduced himself, she bowed to him politely as one would to their lord.

"I never thought I would have the honor of meeting you, Lord Adol Sou La Vald."

Pan'ja felt so shocked, the sky and the earth may as well have been reversed. It was strange that anyone would remember that name, and it was stranger still that they would believe someone with that name still lived. No one should have known his true identity. Somehow, though, this woman did.

"My husband was the grandson of Eisha Goran."

What in the world was going on? That would make Panzel Eisha Goran's great-grandson. The same Eisha Goran who had thrown away everything so that Pan'ja could survive.

Pan'ja was speechless.

The minotaur was in the boss room of the fiftieth floor.

When it had reached the highest floor and decided to aim for the lower floors, it had put the shortsword in storage, pulled out the longsword it had acquired from the fight with the three humans, held it with its right hand, and begun its descent.

It searched for the staircase on each floor and worked its way down the labyrinth.

It entered many boss rooms on many floors but found no enemies strong enough to satisfy its craving. It finally began encountering somewhat challenging enemies from the thirtieth floor onward.

The boss of the fiftieth floor was a giant lizardman.

It held a scimitar in each hand and attacked with a series of moves that exhibited force, speed, and finesse. It would also kick and headbutt if given the chance, and its tail packed a serious punch.

The minotaur took a liking to this enemy. During their long, entertaining battle, the minotaur's longsword broke, so it used the giant club it had gotten from the boss of the thirtieth floor to finish off the lizardman.

Clubs weren't bad, but the minotaur was more interested in swords.

It could not stop thinking about that swordsman's skill. The minotaur was convinced the sword was the weapon of choice for those who aimed for greatness.

But sword blades were often fragile. The minotaur's got nicked considerably when exchanging blows with clubs. Not many swords could withstand a swing with the minotaur's full force behind it without breaking.

It wanted a large, heavy, sturdy sword that it could wield at full strength and use to slice its enemies.

When the lizardman's body vanished, the two scimitars it was holding disappeared with it, but a bigger, more beautiful scimitar appeared in their place.

The minotaur sat down and stared closely at its reward.

If only it were a little bigger...a little heavier...

But it was still a wonderful weapon.

It sensed a great strength in the sword.

The minotaur decided to make that scimitar its main weapon for the time being.

After a moment's consideration, with the scimitar still in its right hand, it used its other hand to pick up the club it had set on the ground.

In its right hand, a sword.

In its left hand, a club.

While thinking back on the lizardman's dual-blade technique, it tried picturing itself fighting while holding both these weapons.

It sensed a presence.

The minotaur turned to see a group of six adventurers walking into the room.

There was a thief, a swordsman, a sorceress, an archer, a war priestess, and a spellblade. They were talking to one another while remaining in strict battle formation.

"Hey. That teleporter mistakenly sent us to the tenth floor instead of the fiftieth floor."

"No, this is definitely the fiftieth floor. Just look outside the room."

"Okay, then why is a minotaur here?"

"Hmm. Maybe it moved."

"Ahhh, *that* explains it. I guess even a monster would get sick of being killed in the same room over and over again. Every now and then, they probably need a change of pace and look for a *different* room to get killed in. Come on—don't be stupid."

"Whether it's supposed to be here or not, this thing seems stronger than a minotaur has any right to be."

"That's true. Well, as long as it drops some good stuff, it makes no difference whether it's a minotaur or that dumb lizard, right?"

"Actually, minotaurs are known for giving pretty crappy drops."

"Ha-ha-ha. I don't think that'll be true for this one. Just look at it. It's holding a Blood Scimitar in its right hand and a Turtle Crusher in its left."

"Those are both blessed items, huh? And one of them is a rare drop. This minotaur sure knew how to give us a warm welcome. Earthbind!"

The adventurers were slowly advancing on the minotaur while they chatted, and once they reached an appropriate distance, the battle began.

That they were able to start fighting without a strategy session or anyone giving orders was a sign of this party's excellent chemistry.

Every time the sorceress cast the movement-binding spell, the minotaur jumped slightly, causing it to miss.

The sorceress uttered a short incantation, casting Haste on the thief and then on the swordsman. Haste was enchantment magic that increased attack and movement speed.

The thief wheeled around to the minotaur's flank, threw a flash bomb at it with his left hand, then with his right, jabbed at its abdomen repeatedly with his saber.

The war priestess prayed, and the swordsman became wreathed in a special aura. This was magic that raised magic defense and physical defense for a short period of time.

The flash bomb went off right next to the minotaur's face, releasing a blinding light accompanied by an explosive sound. That was all the item did, but bestial monsters hated them. This minotaur, however, didn't seem the least bit bothered by the light or the sound and kept the thief at bay with its club.

At the same time, it swung its scimitar down diagonally and cut off the swordsman's head. The minotaur changed the trajectory of the sword in midair at a right angle and sliced open the war priestess's left shoulder.

It lowered its head just in time to avoid a magic arrow, which sailed over it. It then pushed off the ground from its crouching position and charged forward.

The spellblade shot fire daggers at it, but the minotaur simply endured the barrage without even trying to dodge or defend. The attack did not do much damage.

The magic arrow caused a geyser behind it, erupting in a giant pillar of water and releasing a large amount of steam.

The minotaur sent rocks flying with its club.

It charged low and impaled the spellblade with its horns.

The rocks hit the sorceress square in the stomach while she was trying to retrieve a blue potion.

The minotaur continued to charge forward with the spellblade still pinned to its horns.

The thief caught up to it and planted his dagger into its back, but it just fell right back out and onto the ground.

The minotaur swung its scimitar at the sorceress, who had dropped the potion.

The archer finished readying another magic arrow.

Quickly changing the direction of its charge to the right, the minotaur prevented the archer from firing because the sorceress and the magic warrior were now in the way.

Using its scimitar, the minotaur cleaved the sorceress's torso clean in two.

Its club whooshed through the air as it threw the weapon at the archer.

"Call!" the war priestess cried out. The archer, spellblade, thief, and war priestess all then teleported away. This was a summoning skill that worked on party members within a certain distance.

After quickly losing two people, they decided they could not defeat the minotaur. Making use of the items they had on hand to distract it, they made their escape.

“What are you saying?! We just lost two people! If such a dangerous monster had become the boss of the fiftieth floor, why didn’t you tell us that before you teleported us there?!”

“I’m very sorry for your loss. Had you purchased information on the labyrinth beforehand, we would have told you about the minotaur everyone has been discussing of late.”

“That only makes this worse! You didn’t even think to suggest that we buy information!”

“Right now, in Micaene, even children know about the minotaur. Any adventurer, no matter how much of a beginner they are, should know about it as well. It’s already common knowledge that the creature won’t attack unless you attack it first.”

“We didn’t know anything about that! It’s been two years since we entered this labyrinth!”

“Even the guild did not yet know that the minotaur had made it to the fiftieth floor. That, however, is probably only temporary. It is natural to assume it will continue to descend to the lower floors. It was simply bad luck that it happened to be there when you decided to challenge the fiftieth-floor boss.”

“Because of that, we engaged it without any idea how strong it really was! This is all your fault!”

“I’ll say this clearly. Arriving at this town for the first time in years and then quickly challenging the fiftieth floor of the labyrinth without any preliminary research is a failure brought about by your own carelessness. You could have turned back as soon as you saw the lizardman wasn’t in the boss room. The minotaur made no move to attack until you engaged it, correct? You assumed that risk of your own accord. You must take responsibility for your own actions when challenging a labyrinth.”

The archer Deeditt had no comeback for the manager.

The party had gotten their start in this town before deciding to travel and challenge other labyrinths in order to become strong enough to defeat the lizardman. They had also completed various jobs along the way. They had gained experience, upped their ranks, and obtained good equipment.

After arriving in Micaene, they’d celebrated their long-awaited return by requesting the teleportation service to the fiftieth floor as soon as they visited the guild.

They didn’t think there was a chance they would lose. They believed they had become strong enough to handle it. For that reason, just this once, they’d skipped the information-gathering step they always

performed after reaching a new area, thinking they knew the boss of the fiftieth floor well enough already.

They had been careless and arrogant, and now two of their friends with whom they'd adventured for so long were dead.

Deeditt stopped arguing and instead just stood there, clasping his hands together in deep regret.

7

The minotaur was still in the boss room of the fiftieth floor.

It had taken a liking to fighting the giant lizardman and wanted a second scimitar, so it was waiting for it to respawn.

It leaned against the stone wall and thought back on the fight it had just had with that party.

They had been careless. They had greatly underestimated its strength.

Thanks to that, it had been able to turn the tide of battle in its favor very quickly.

But how would the encounter have gone had they not been careless? They were not that strong individually, but their teamwork was impressive.

Humans had a great number of techniques. It had learned a variety of new ones from that fight.

Humans sure made for interesting enemies. The minotaur looked forward to its next brush with them.

Its hunger—its lifelong companion—continued to rage, but the minotaur had learned to take enjoyment in this as well.

Chapter 9

The Hunt Is On

1

The minotaur ended up fighting the giant lizardman five more times.

Each time, the boss dropped a sharp, ordinary scimitar with no blessing.

It did, however, also drop a skill. Humans called this skill Warrior's Protection. It increased your strength and magic resistance and constantly refilled your stamina at a fixed rate. It remained active unless you deactivated it yourself, so it was easy to use.

Most importantly, the minotaur was glad for the opportunity to learn some sword techniques. The lizardman was the first nonhuman enemy to teach it some interesting swordplay.

It had received a high-quality longsword and various potions from the humans it had killed in the fight against the recent party.

The minotaur then descended farther and farther down. It fought the boss of every floor. It also got into many battles with humans.

For a while, it adopted a two-sword style using the Blood Scimitar and one of the lizardman's regular scimitars. It tried a variety of moves while recalling its fights against the lizardman boss.

On the fifty-second floor, it fought a group of three humans, killed one of them, and obtained a halberd.

After crushing the boss of the fifty-fifth floor, it officially obtained the skill Charge. This skill was extremely well suited to the minotaur and increased the force of its charge remarkably.

It then fought a group of four people, killed them all, and was rewarded with some explosives.

Once it grew tired of using the scimitars, it fished around in its storage for a new weapon. A blessed bastard sword it had gotten from an adventurer caught its attention. For some reason, it felt very familiar, and the minotaur decided to try it.

It was only natural that this blade would feel familiar to the monster adventurer—this bastard sword was a very rare drop that one could receive from killing the minotaur, after all. Because the minotaur

could not encounter another of its kind, this weapon was impossible for it to obtain on its own.

There were no easy fights from the fiftieth floor on, whether it was fighting the boss of a floor or against humans. There were multiple occasions where the minotaur was pushed to the brink of death, defeating its enemies while wounded and collapsing before obtaining new power.

The monsters that roamed the corridors on the sixty-second floor were one-eyed ghosts. The minotaur had no idea how to defeat them. It failed again and again, then finally discovered that it could kill them with an elemental weapon from its storage. Once it obtained the skill Crushing Breath on a slightly lower floor, it no longer had any trouble with incorporeal monsters.

It had a tough battle with humans on the sixty-second floor as well. It was a fight that taught it not to underestimate the usefulness of a shield.

The boss of the eightieth floor, a manticore, dropped a blessed Zweihänder, which became the minotaur's main weapon. Its weight and destructive power were satisfactory, but the sword's center of gravity was too far to the front, and its make seemed rough, rendering it tricky to use. The minotaur felt there would be another weapon that suited it better.

From armor to gauntlets, shields to boots, the humans dropped a large amount of defensive equipment, some of it with blessings that would thrill most adventurers. The minotaur, however, had no interest in defensive equipment and tossed these items unceremoniously into its storage.

It did the same with accessories like necklaces, rings, bracelets, and all weapons other than swords.

It did collect potions and other items that granted various buffs and used them as well.

Fighting without defensive equipment caused the minotaur's physical defense and magic defense to increase more quickly than they would have otherwise.

The beast also stored whatever else caught its eye from among the dropped items of the adventurers who attacked it.

One such item the minotaur had received from an adventurer that it quickly grew fond of was a belt.

During a fight against a party of humans, a spellblade was pulling potions out of the pouches in their belt in quick succession and drinking them. The minotaur wondered how the belt could fit that many, so it killed the spellblade and studied the belt.

If you put a consumable item into one of the pouches and then used it, the belt would automatically reload with another of the same item

from your storage.

This belt also carried a blessing that increased movement speed by 10 percent and stamina by 20 percent. The minotaur took a liking to this item and used it habitually from then on.

It put explosives in two of the pouches. They had no use beyond exploding when thrown, but the humans who came to the lower floors often had them, so they were easy to replenish. The minotaur was becoming much better at using them to hit sorcerers camping in the rear guard of their parties.

Afterward, the minotaur fought the boss of the ninetieth floor, which turned out to be a chimera. The chimera's normal drop was an exploding sword. It was basically an explosive in the shape of a sword but more powerful than the other explosives it had been collecting and could be thrown more accurately and from farther away.

Human adventurers considered the explosive sword a worthless drop, but the minotaur took a liking to it and killed over twenty chimeras in a row to stock up on them.

When humans defeated monsters, they gained experience points, but they gained none from killing other humans. It was the opposite for the minotaur. It gained experience from killing humans but not monsters. Even if defeating monsters got it no closer to a level-up, though, fighting them was still a good way to hone its skills.

Each monster was totally different from the last.

Every time the minotaur encountered a new creature, it would endure or dodge its attacks, analyze its characteristics, devise an effective battle strategy, hone its techniques, and then kill it.

Encountering strong enemies and learning to defeat them filled the minotaur with joy. It felt like it was fulfilling its purpose in life.

It also obtained blessings called skill drops from monsters.

It learned a skill that expelled hot, damaging breath; a skill that lowered the probability of suffering a critical hit; a skill that allowed the user to detect the positions and types of enemies on their current floor; and more, including many that humans could not learn.

It ranked up Warcry, which had become so strong that it seemed like a different skill altogether.

There was more to gain from fighting humans than experience points alone. It was also a valuable opportunity for study. The minotaur could observe methods of sword fighting and also all kinds of magic, weapons, attacks, methods of teamwork, and more, and it absorbed this information greedily.

“Dammit. That old bastard...”

Muttering in annoyance, Logan rubbed a red potion into the wound on his chest. Red potions didn't have much of an effect outside of labyrinths, but they weren't totally ineffective. Logan actually had an item in his Bag that would have healed this wound instantly, but he didn't feel like using it at the moment.

Seven days after the Heavenly Blade's son and chief vassal had come to the guild, he had been invited to dinner at House Mercurius. According to the messenger, they wanted to hear him share memories about Percival. That was probably something Julius himself had asked for.

Logan had accepted the proposal, visited the House Mercurius estate, and talked about Percival's younger days. Julius listened attentively, his eyes glistening. The alcohol and food were delicious.

Panzel had also been at dinner. It looked like House Mercurius really had hired him. Actually, he was probably more than a mere employee. The chief vassal seemed to always be keeping him close at hand. He was likely thinking that, with some training, Panzel could go on to achieve great things. Logan was in complete agreement with that assessment.

The invites hadn't stopped there. He soon received a subsequent invitation, then a third. Julius seemed to want Logan to come over every day, but no matter how close Micaene was to the royal capital, he was very busy as the guild leader and couldn't go out that often. He was now visiting about once every seven to ten days. He had already visited over ten times.

The last time he'd gone, Julius had asked him a question after hearing that his weapon of choice was a war hammer.

“What kind of weapon is a war hammer?”

With the chief vassal's permission, Logan produced the real thing and showed it to him. It was then that the chief vassal had added some of his own commentary.

“It's not a weapon that requires skill, but it's extremely powerful and cannot be managed unless the user has tremendous strength.”

Logan was offended by his choice of words.

“What was that? ‘Not a weapon that requires skill,’ huh? How about I give you a taste of my skill?”

They moved to a dueling ground, and Logan squared off against Pan'ja, who used a longsword.

Logan won, of course. He broke three of Pan'ja's swords, and after breaking a few bones as well, the chief vassal surrendered.

The chief vassal, however, was something of a sore loser and challenged Logan again after dinner. Rather immaturely, this time he ended up using a longsword so ridiculously thick, Logan wondered if

it was a family heirloom or something.

To Logan's shock, he was unable to break the longsword with his hammer, even with a direct blow. He became intent on shattering it, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't do so. The chief vassal broke through his defense and slashed him across the chest, and this time, Logan was forced to surrender.

There was no way that would happen next time. He would show that arrogant old man the true capability of the war hammer.

"Mr. Logan."

"Later, Eador. I'm in a bad mood."

"It's an imperial messenger."

"Huh?"

"Viscount Stinger has arrived carrying a secret royal decree from His Majesty."

3

Viscount Stinger said he wanted to hear everything Logan knew about the strange minotaur. Logan shared with him all the information he had gathered.

The viscount then asked for more details about Gil Linx, who was currently missing. He asked whether or not Logan thought Gil had been killed by the minotaur.

Logan told the viscount everything he knew about the current situation without holding anything back. He said he didn't think there was any way the great sorcerer could have been killed by the minotaur.

No matter how strong a unique monster the minotaur was, Gil could have eliminated it with a single long-distance attack. The minotaur would have no way to defend against it.

He could assume that the minotaur had had Alestra's Bracelet at the time, but no one could use it other than the Heavenly Blade or his son. There was no way a monster would be able to. Even on the small chance that it could, Gil had magic at his disposal that could be used in ways that did not require hitting his opponent with a spell directly. Gil was also a master of close combat.

He conveyed all of this to the messenger.

"But his life force did disappear, correct?"

"That is true, but I just can't bring myself to believe that Gil is dead. I've decided to believe he's simply gone somewhere I can't see him."

The viscount ended up leaving without sharing the contents of the royal decree.

The next day, the viscount visited again and officially conveyed the king's order. It was to convene a hunt for the minotaur under the guild leader's name. The one actually paying the reward was the king, but he could not organize this task himself. The reward being offered was enough money to buy multiple guilds. Logan's commission was also tremendous.

The official reason for the hunt was to exterminate the minotaur thought to have killed Gil Linx and recover his lost property, but Logan suspected the true motive lay elsewhere.

Logan found the information supplied by Viscount Stinger insufficient, so he indicated he would comply with the order but would need two days to come up with a reasonable implementation, as the incredibly high reward would be likely to raise suspicion and discord among the adventurers. The viscount said he would leave the details to Logan and left.

It would be difficult for him to investigate the happenings of the royal palace in a timely manner, so Logan wrote a letter to Pan'ja with some questions. Shortly afterward, Pan'ja himself visited the guild.

"We reported Lord Percival's death sixty days after his life force vanished from the crystal ball, and we have already applied for Lord Julius's succession to head of the family." It had probably taken him that long to sort out all the necessary preparations. "The king should have received our application within five to seven days."

"So that means around ten days ago."

"I believe it was eight."

"Hmm. What happened then?"

"In order for you to fully grasp the situation, there are some things you need to know."

The chief vassal was giving him a stern look. He wanted to make sure Logan knew he couldn't breathe a word of this to anyone.

Logan met the chief vassal's eyes seriously and nodded.

The chief vassal then related a story, mixing in some of his own conjecture.

4

The previous king's second queen fell into the king's disfavor after she gave birth to a daughter, and he confined her to her quarters.

From then on, she lived imprisoned with her child in a deep corner of the inner palace. What people didn't know, however, was that this was actually an arrangement by the previous king to try to give the second queen and her child a peaceful life.

The current king inherited this sentiment from his father, and while he publicly pretended to shun his half-sister, he actually held a deep affection for her.

His half-sister was supposed to quietly live out her entire life in that deep corner of the palace, but she ended up falling in love with a man after having what felt like a miracle encounter.

This man turned out to be someone the king loved for his bravery and integrity—the young head of House Mercurius. When the young man prostrated himself before the king, begging him for permission to marry his lover without yet knowing her true identity, the king had never felt such joy in all his life.

The king decided to forgo the official proceedings normally expected when marrying off a royal princess to a subject, instead allowing her to marry under the subordinate family name she had used all her life. He did this to convey his will that they would not be treated as a branch of the royal family.

When the king heard the couple had given birth to a baby boy, he was overcome with joy and tried to send out a royal messenger. However, he was warned against this by a trusted adviser. They couldn't take even the smallest risk of the major nobles becoming aware that the boy had a claim as sixth in line for the throne. If certain circumstances aligned, the boy could even become king.

Then, just recently, the king received notice that Percival Mercurius had died of illness. He was horrified and ordered a discreet investigation.

He subsequently learned that Percival had been killed by a minotaur. His sister, who had seemed so happy, had become a widow. His cute nephew, whom he had never had a chance to meet, was now a boy without a father.

To the king, the minotaur had become an enemy of the throne.

However, he couldn't dispatch a squadron of knights just to avenge the death of one noble. Neither could he reveal publicly that Percival had been killed by a monster in the labyrinth.

For that reason, he used the death of Gil Linx, a man who had done great things for the royal family and the kingdom, as a pretext to offer a reward from the royal coffers for the extermination of the minotaur. Of course, this was done with the utmost confidentiality.

"I see. So that's what's going on," Logan remarked after Pan'ja finished his story.

Logan set an impressive reward for the hunt and posted the job to the request board on the first floor of the guild. It was an extraordinary sum of money for defeating a single monster, and adventurers showed up to take on the job one after another.

Logan was convinced that the minotaur would soon be defeated.

As the minotaur descended deeper into the labyrinth, the battles became more harrowing, and there were several times it almost died.

The fight against the boss of the one hundredth floor, the metal dragon, was especially difficult, and the minotaur suffered many harsh defeats. But it continued training and challenging this foe and, eventually, emerged victorious.

After a certain point, strong parties of humans began attacking the minotaur in succession, for which it was grateful. The minotaur killed them all and, in doing so, was able to raise its level, learn new skills, and replenish its consumable items.

After defeating the metal dragon once, the minotaur fought it many more times. It was a valuable fight not just because it was a very strong enemy but also because it dropped a different type of amazing sword every time it was killed.

The minotaur killed dragon after dragon after dragon, each time looking forward to the next sword that would appear.

It fought the metal dragon using a longsword.

It fought it using a shortsword.

It fought it while relying heavily on its skills.

Some battles were long.

Some were very short.

It tried out a wide variety of fighting styles, and after it killed the final boss one hundred times, the dragon stopped spawning.

It was as if the labyrinth had recognized that the minotaur, not the metal dragon, was now the master of the boss room of the deepest floor.

The minotaur remained there. There were no longer any monsters it wanted to fight. If there were any opponents worth engaging, they would be humans.

Adventurers came to the boss room repeatedly to challenge it.

Still, the minotaur's hunger was not yet quelled.

An enemy truly worth fighting, an enemy truly worth defeating, had yet to appear.

The minotaur needed to grow stronger to prepare for that day.

By the time it became clear that the minotaur had become the new ruler of the boss room of the labyrinth's final floor, two years had

passed.

There was still no shortage of adventurers being attracted by the high reward to be gained from slaying the beast. Rumors of an invincible monster gradually spread across the land, and challengers gathered from far and wide.

Once the number of adventurers defeated and killed by the minotaur exceeded three hundred, Logan had no choice but to withdraw the hunt. Then, in order to take responsibility for allowing this situation to happen, he resigned as guild leader. Eador, the manager, succeeded him.

The adventurers were surprised that someone without a background as an adventurer was being named guild leader, but the guild employees all trusted him.

Logan was now living at House Mercurius. Pan'ja Raban had been inviting him to quit his busy job at the guild and move into their estate for a while. He had fun lending a hand with Panzel's training. The boy was showing remarkable growth. And best of all, life at House Mercurius was comfortable.

After some time, the request was posted again under the new guild leader. Many strong parties set their sights on killing this powerful monster. Many died, and many fled.

The most persistent of all was the sorcerer named Eisel. But in the end, he died as well.

The minotaur was still alive and well on the final floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

Chapter 10

The Promised Day

1

At a weapons shop located near the Sazardon Labyrinth, a merchant entered.

“Welcome, Mr. Tormon.”

“Oh, hey, Viena! You’re as lovely as ever.”

“Why, thank you.”

“Tormon.”

“Hey, Pops! It’s been a while.”

“So you’ve decided to return.”

“Yep, I just got back. I heard something really crazy. Apparently, the royal palace sent an insane amount of people to go take it down.”

“Ah, that? Let’s move farther inside. Viena, watch the shop for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, what do we need to do that for? Can we not talk about this out in the open?”

“I just figured we could speak over here without holding anything back. Making fun of the knights at the front of the store could get us into trouble. Ba-ha-ha!”

“Hey, what are you laughing for? These guys are trying to kill our king.”

“What, have you not heard? The hunt, or whatever it was they called it, failed.”

“Huh? It failed? But didn’t they just enter the labyrinth yesterday?”

“Yup. And they failed yesterday.”

“That’s crazy fast. Did they just give up and leave?”

“They didn’t give up. They were wiped out.”

“W-wiped out? Wait, hold on. I heard that close to fifty people went in.”

“It was seventy-two, actually. There were eight parties of eight, then two teleporters, two sorcerers specializing in healing magic, and two people for general support. They also brought an observer and another person to act as the commander or something.”

“Gods above! What in the world made them send so many...?”

“Even now, ‘hunting parties,’ as they’re called, are occasionally being dispatched to the one hundredth floor to challenge the boss.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Why a boss that never leaves its room needs to be killed, though, no one understands. If they have that much spare time, they should use it to take out brigands or the monsters on the roads.”

“The only reason for it is to gain prestige for the knights. After all, in the case of the metal dragon, even if it was killed with sheer numbers, everyone present was able to call themselves a dragonslayer.”

“But they couldn’t have all killed it; that’s impossible.”

“Of course not. Each party had a maximum of eight people, after all. Normally, only those in the party that actually finished off the metal dragon would be called dragonslayers. For that reason, the knights wouldn’t share publicly which party actually defeated it. They would take turns fighting the metal dragon, and the ones that weren’t fighting would sit back and feast on some delicious food. They would all work at weakening the boss over a period of several days, and in the end, they’d get together and hack it to pieces. If they were ever tired or faring poorly, they could just run back out of the boss room. The end result was the metal dragon simply being tormented to death by dozens of people, but everyone there got to call themselves a dragonslayer, even if they didn’t have a direct hand in defeating it.”

“That’s crazy! Most people would just leave and try again another day if they were unable to beat it.”

“Prestige is extremely important to knights and nobles. The shame would be too great for them to walk away in defeat.”

“But, man. Against those kinds of numbers, no matter how strong our Bull-Headed King is, that’s just unfair.”

“The first eight people to enter the room were burned by the boss’s breath and died instantly.”

“Huh? Wait, I don’t understand. Surely they were wearing equipment to increase magic defense and lessen elemental damage, right?”

“They weren’t. And why, you ask? They didn’t know it had that kind of attack. They were convinced it would use the Warcry skill characteristic of minotaurs. For that reason, they brought equipment specialized for physical defense and only prepared for resisting status effects.”

“Are you serious?! There’s no way. There’s no way they were that stupid. What a disgrace. Even kids know about how many skills His Majesty has.”

“Yep, it’s common knowledge. But the higher-ups at the royal castle were somehow unaware. Hardly surprising at this point, right?”

“Ba-ha-ha-ha! That’s too true. Even His Grace would’ve been hopeless if you just used four people to hold him down and then went all out with support magic.”

“But that’s the thing. They didn’t do anything to hold him down. The commander didn’t send anyone to restrain the minotaur and instead stood right outside the boss room, giving orders to the next party.”

“No way... That’ll get you killed for sure.”

“That it did. The commander was killed first. The party closest to him was next. And why did *that* happen, you ask? Because they didn’t know the King of the Labyrinth could leave his boss room.”

“...Huh? All it takes is a little common sense. If His Moojesty couldn’t leave the boss room, how do they think he got from the tenth floor to the hundredth?”

“No matter how much of a half-wit a person is, they should be able to realize that. We lowly peasants can’t begin to imagine how the exalted nobility thinks, though. Anyway, at this point, two parties had been taken out, but the Sazardon King’s incredible performance was only just getting started.”

“Ooooh, tell me what happened next.”

“I don’t know how our king even found out about this place, but he went straight for the army’s camp and began to lay siege to it. He killed the teleporters first, then the sorcerers who specialized in recovery. He then destroyed all their barriers. The same barriers they were using to keep the basilisks out.”

“Whoa.”

“And then, I don’t know how he did this, either, but he called the basilisks to the camp.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Having lost their commander and being swarmed by basilisks, the knights fell into mass confusion, every one of them fleeing in terror. Some were killed by running into a room full of hydras, and others became prey for our Supreme Overlord.”

“How shameful.”

“And finally came our Bovine Sovereign’s greatest touch—only the count who was there as an observer was left unharmed. When evening came, Eador, the leader of the Adventurers Guild, sent a teleporter, a scout, and a sorcerer specializing in defense to discreetly check on the knights, and they ended up rescuing the count. He was half-crazed and raving, but the guild leader was able to question him and learn everything that happened.”

“I-incredible. That’s our Two-Horned Emperor for ya! Man, I don’t know where that division came from, but those knights sound really pathetic.”

“Oh, you haven’t heard that, either? It was the Fourth Division of the Imperial Guard. The entire division.”

“What? The Imperial Guard? And they sent that many soldiers from a single division? So does that mean the Fourth Division is just gone now?”

“Anyone can see it was an attempt to increase the authority of the second prince or, more accurately, the authority of the Duke of Riga. There were, of course, those of the opinion that if they were going to send a hunting party from the Imperial Guard, they should choose knights from all the divisions. The duke rejected this, saying that the Fourth Division had the most elite knights and that they worked best together. And you know how that turned out. The Duke of Riga lost a lot of face. After all, the Fourth Division was made up of second and third sons from noble families loyal to him. Dissatisfaction and grudges mounted within his faction. They’re all trying to push the blame on others in order to protect their own positions, but the entire country knows the truth of what happened.”

“That we do! I’ll help to spread the word.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Spread it far and wide. It seems that Eador guy is already planting the seeds.”

“Hey, Pops.”

“What’s up?”

“We’ve been calling it the King of the Labyrinth as a joke...but that monster...”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, I get that it’s a monster, but...it’s really incredible.”

“It really is.”

“It was born on the tenth floor. Then, by some crazy miracle, it was able to leave its boss room. It defeated many strong enemies, and got stronger itself, and learned amazing techniques no minotaur has ever learned until now.”

“That’s right.”

“It challenged the boss of every floor as it worked its way down the labyrinth. In the end, it killed the metal dragon and became the new boss of the one hundredth floor. And despite its strength, it never initiates combat with humans. It kills humans who attack it, but if they run, it leaves them alone.”

“It doesn’t fight people weaker than it is. Our Minotaur Monarch is truly admirable. It doesn’t want to kill. It wants to fight. It’s a warrior through and through.”

“Yes, exactly! It’s a warrior. That and a very wealthy merchant.”

“A merchant?”

“There was something my teacher always told me. The merchants who work the hardest will find the most business. Just like His Royal

Beefiness. He pushed himself harder than anybody, and now look at how far he's come."

"I see what you mean. That monster is a role model for merchants everywhere."

"Exactly! It's got to have an incredible amount of treasure. I'll bet it's as rich as anyone in the land. Hey, Pops."

"What?"

"Let's go drinking."

"It's a little early for that, but sure."

"Let's drink to the Monster King's victory."

"Hmm, as much as I'd love to, that could get us into trouble."

"Okay then, let's just drink to the prosperity of our king. We don't have to say which king, though!"

"Ha-ha-ha! You know, Tormon..."

"What is it?"

"Someday a hero will appear and take down the minotaur."

"Alone? That's impossible."

"If our beloved minotaur has taught us anything, it's that nothing is impossible. Someday, someone will show up and take it down in a one-on-one duel. You may not think so, but I would bet that our king is even looking forward to that day."

Viena poked her head into the room. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there's a customer looking for a one-handed sword with a blessing that increases attack power. Could you please come help him?"

"Got it—I'll be right out. Sorry, Tormon, but please wait a moment."

"All right," responded the merchant Tormon, and he lined up three chairs and lay himself down across them.

The area around the Sazardon Labyrinth was experiencing a period of prosperity.

Top-rank adventurers were gathering in droves, and mid-rank adventurers were following their lead. Micaene also attracted skilled merchants and craftsmen, which led to the very best goods being assembled there as well. This created benefits for beginner adventurers.

There were now a vast number of adventurers of every level in Micaene, and the Sazardon Labyrinth had the capacity to accommodate them all. Items obtained from this labyrinth were also vastly superior in quality and quantity when compared to other labyrinths.

There were many shops that bought items from adventurers and ones that bought and processed those items. There were shops that sold to adventurers and others that offered meals, lodging, and other services.

The Micaene Adventurers Guild was doing a great job of serving as

mediator between these shops and the adventurers as well as providing various kinds of support.

There were also many new adventurers who decided to get their start in Micaene as well as those who moved there to settle down permanently.

They all had the ultimate goal of defeating the Labyrinth King.

Doing so would make them a hero of the modern age.

Nevertheless, such an event was likely still a long way off, so for now, the people of Baldemost could brag on their travels about the unique monster that couldn't be found anywhere else.

Come to think of it, Tormon hadn't seen any starving kids with ragged clothing in the streets of Micaene recently.

"That must also be thanks to our virtuous king," Tormon muttered to himself as he dozed off to sleep.

2

"Pan'ja, calm down."

"Do I not seem calm?"

"Not even a little bit. I think you're too excited."

"Ha-ha."

Pan'ja Raban and Logan were both equipping their armor. Julius, the current head of House Mercurius, was also wearing armor.

House Riga was set to attack at any moment. A battle with everything on the line was about to begin.

Seventeen years had passed since the strange minotaur had appeared and Percival had lost his life. Panzel was now twenty-four years old and a knight. He should have been receiving a royal order from the palace to kill the minotaur at that very moment.

House Riga was taking advantage of Panzel's absence by sending soldiers to attack House Mercurius. At the same time, they also had soldiers surrounding the royal palace and were pressuring the king to abdicate the throne to the second-eldest prince.

If they were able to fend off this attack, it would spell the end of House Riga, and there was nothing Pan'ja wished for more dearly than that.

"A vassal has returned from the royal palace."

"Let him through."

Pan'ja had given up his position as chief vassal for his successor and was now respected as a wise and veteran presence in the family. Old age and poor health kept him bedridden, but this was a time of emergency, so he left the softness of his bed to return to the

battlefield, taking command of the family's soldiers.

"I have returned from the royal palace."

"Did he receive the royal order?"

"Yes. Sir Panzel ventured into the labyrinth along with an observer."

"Who is the observer?"

"Evert Lowell."

A feeling of relief swept through the room. House Lowell was a noble family of counsel, and Evert was an honorable person. He held the important office of privy counselor and was a trusted adviser of the king. There was no way he was a supporter of House Riga.

They had done all they could to prevent the observer from being someone in the pocket of the Duke of Riga. Everything should be fine if Evert was the observer.

"Wasn't there a teleport sorcerer with some connection to Lord Evert?"

"Yes, sir. He is a vassal of House Lowell. He is waiting on the head of guild's transport service in the labyrinth."

Teleport sorcerers could teleport only to places they had been to at least once before. For that reason, to be able to travel everywhere within the labyrinth, they had to be escorted to the one hundredth floor at least once.

"What are the conditions for the hunt?"

"Sir Panzel has been restricted from taking recovery items or food."

"Food?"

It was expected that he wouldn't be allowed to use recovery items. If Panzel was to be established as the twenty-fifth Defender of the Realm, the first to be awarded the position in a thousand years, his strength needed to be overwhelming. Pan'ja knew the Duke of Riga's faction was responsible for that reasoning. Regardless, while not being able to use recovery items was a harsh condition, Panzel should be able to handle it.

However, forbidding him from carrying food didn't make any sense. There would be no time to eat during the duel with the minotaur anyway.

"Garrest's force is approaching!"

This was no time to be lost in thought. The enemy was on the march.

Riga had made two lapses in judgment. First, he was counting on Panzel not returning from his fight with the minotaur. Second, he was working under the assumption that the bedridden Pan'ja Raban would be unable to get up and fight.

You're going to regret underestimating us, Alkan, Duke of Riga.

I'm going to destroy you.

First your oldest son, Garrest, will die.

3

Humans were approaching.

They were clearly heading for this room.

It had been a long time.

It seemed as though this encounter would be worth the wait, though.

Thinking that this human was very strong, the minotaur grabbed its favorite sword. It was one dropped by the metal dragon the fiftieth time the minotaur defeated it. It was a thick longsword with a black blade that widened a little as it got closer to the tip. The blade was single-edged, but the tip was double-edged.

The sword was endowed with one of the five best blessings of any weapon the minotaur had obtained, but more importantly, it liked the length, weight, and how the grip felt in its hands.

It looked crude at a glance, but the blade was capable of carrying out the user's will to the fullest. When the minotaur swung the weapon, it became one with the sword.

The blade was lacking in sharpness, but if swung with proper technique, it possessed fearsome cutting ability.

The minotaur had defeated the metal dragon multiple times with this sword and honed many techniques in the process.

The humans who entered his chamber were only two in number.

"It's been a while, strange warrior. Though I doubt you remember me. Seventeen years ago, we met on the first floor of this labyrinth. You gave me a bracelet. It is thanks to that bracelet I was able to meet the people I serve today. We were able to cure my mother's illness, and she lived out the rest of her days in happiness. For all of that, I thank you."

The minotaur did not understand the language of man.

Once this human finished his ritualistic performance, though, he was going to come at it with incredible fighting spirit. That was what the minotaur understood, so it waited patiently for the knight to finish speaking.

"I have received a royal order from the king to kill you. Today, I want to use my strength to repay my debt to you. I hope we can have a great battle. The person behind me is just an observer. He will not participate in the fight."

The black-haired, black-eyed knight drew his shining white sword and took one step forward. The man behind him stayed at the

entrance.

The minotaur then understood that its only opponent was the man in front of it.

They faced each other with their swords in hand, and the minotaur realized this young human had a special strength. There was no doubt he was stronger than any swordsman it had encountered yet.

The minotaur planned to use a lunging attack once they both entered striking distance, but the knight got the jump on it and struck first.

This challenger was very skilled. The minotaur was impressed by how quickly he was able to predict how it would move.

The knight held his long, beautiful white sword in both hands and slashed upward from right to left. From the minotaur's point of view, the attack was coming from the left and moving up toward its torso.

The minotaur lifted its sword with both hands from the right to repel the knight's attack. Before its black blade met the knight's white sword, though, a chill ran down its spine.

The minotaur's instinct told it the knight's sword could not be blocked with normal force. It braced itself and its weapon for impact.

The knight somehow made the swing look casual, but it had unbelievable weight behind it as it crashed into the minotaur's sturdy sword.

The knight then took advantage of the minotaur's defensive reaction, all the weight behind his previous attack disappearing instantly as he raised his sword and swung in a brilliant arc for the minotaur's neck.

The move was natural and efficient, like he had planned it from the beginning.

This skill!

A surge of emotion welled up within the minotaur, coursing through its body and sending its thoughts racing.

Him.

Him.

I was born to fight him.

I became strong in order to kill him.

The minotaur quickly raised its black blade to block the knight's white sword, which was heading for the back of its neck on the left side.

The fact that the man was in a position to aim for the minotaur's neck also meant he was in range for the minotaur to strike at any part of his body.

The minotaur thrust its sword down to the left, aiming for the knight's right flank. He should have been too close to have any option other than to jump to the side to try to minimize damage from the

minotaur's attack.

Instead, the knight made no effort to move, changing course with his sword in midair and aiming for the minotaur's neck on the right.

The minotaur released its grip with its left hand, bent its right elbow, and used the hilt to block the knight's blade.

This knocked the knight's sword off course, and the minotaur was able to twist its neck to avoid his slash.

The knight's weapon ended up cutting off half of the minotaur's right horn.

The minotaur was surprised. His opponent had not even considered protecting himself, instead remaining totally cool and aiming for the minotaur's neck.

Just who is this human?

The knight's sword was still in the air from his previous attack, which gave the minotaur a chance to strike. It quickly drew its left hand back, then swung its sword in a clockwise circular motion.

It was a beautiful, perfect circle.

Ever since its intense battle to the death with that swordsman, the minotaur could not stop thinking about the beautiful circular arcs its victim had drawn with his sword. The minotaur wanted to be able to draw those circles, too.

So it practiced.

Horizontal circles.

Vertical circles.

Circles cutting with the tip of the sword.

Circles cutting with the shaft of the sword.

Circles to entrap its opponent.

Circles to knock its opponent down.

It then came to understand the beauty, the strength, the reliability of the circle.

The attack the minotaur was using now was the strongest it had created in training.

It swung its sword in a circle over the knight's head, encompassing his entire body.

Even if the human reacted to this move with a perfect stance, the minotaur's attack had too much force for him to catch any blows or dodge. The minotaur had formed an arc inside of which it was completely safe. There was nothing the knight could do to defend himself.

Just as I was unable to do anything against the circle that swordsman created, now that you are in mine, you will be destroyed.

Escape is impossible. I will slice open your stomach, your back, your legs.

Believing the battle was nearly over, the minotaur watched as the knight withdrew his blade and took a half step back.

The minotaur's black sword swung for the challenger with perfect accuracy and certain death in mind, but the knight made no move to block, instead swinging his white sword in the exact same arc, with the same trajectory.

The two blades rushed toward each other like lovers bound by fate as they sliced through the air.

The minotaur tried to maintain the trajectory of its sword, but excess speed in the tip caused it to be knocked off course. The knight's weapon traced his intended trajectory that would have blocked the minotaur's sword, returning to his side.

They both stepped back and gathered their breath.

The whole exchange had occurred in the span of two breaths. Their back-and-forth was thrilling and pleased the minotaur to no end. Its excitement grew with each blow, and it was filled with such ecstasy that it thought its heart would burst.

During their last exchange, the minotaur had discovered one of the knight's weak points—his blade.

The knight's white sword was quite sharp. However, with a strong enough swing, the minotaur should have been able to break it.

This human would not be defeated by simple technique. The minotaur decided it would put everything it had, all the destructive force it could muster, into its next blow.

It then activated skills to double its attack power, raise its physical strength and defense, and double its critical rate. While the minotaur was activating its skills, the knight did the same.

He has good sense.

He must also be going all out with his next attack.

But when our swords meet, yours will break, and you will die.

The minotaur sucked in a large breath, held its sword high above its head, drew on every bit of its strength, traced a giant arc, and from the apex, swung down with all its might.

The knight also traced a magnificent arc and met the minotaur's sword head-on.

The black and white swords clashed directly for the first time. Their impact was accompanied by an explosive sound, and sparks flew as both blades broke.

The white sword shattered into bluish-silver fragments, and the black sword shattered into purplish-red fragments, all flying up into the air and shining as they fell to the ground.

The minotaur thought it beautiful. This was the first time this strange monster, born underground and certain to die there, had ever seen stars.

That was the skill known as Weapon Destruction. The minotaur could use this skill itself, so it knew it well. It could not believe the

knight had trained in it enough to be capable of breaking its black sword, though.

Had its opponent responded to that blow any other way, he would have suffered a lethal wound.

The minotaur expected them both to step back and draw new swords. The knight, however, defied his expectations.

Still barehanded, he spread his hands wide and grabbed the minotaur.

Do you plan to match me in a contest of strength?

After a moment of bewilderment, the minotaur met his challenge.

Right hand met left, and left met right as they gripped each other's fingers tightly.

The knight had a large build for a human, but the minotaur was a full head taller. The minotaur leaned in, trying to crush the challenger from above with its weight.

But he would not break.

The knight's arm strength rivaled the minotaur's, and the minotaur could not move him at all. It was surprised.

The knight was cleverly tightening his gauntlet-covered fingers into the minotaur's in a way that prevented it from exercising its full strength.

This meant it was not a simple contest of strength. The knight was employing a special technique of his.

Even understanding that, this monster born as violence incarnate could not help but be infuriated.

A challenge of strength?

With a mere human?

Don't be absurd.

You think you can hold back my power using some trick?

The minotaur sucked in a quick breath, then immediately leaned forward as hard as it could.

That was exactly the moment the knight had been waiting for.

Once the minotaur leaned forward, he twisted his body, pushed with his legs, and sent the minotaur's massive figure hurling through the air.

To the minotaur, it felt as if it had been sent flying by its own strength.

After it landed, the knight grabbed the minotaur's right wrist with his right hand and twisted it behind its back. He then held down its back with his right knee and wrapped his left arm around the minotaur's throat.

Just like that, the knight began wringing the minotaur's neck.

This was bad. It would be killed if it could not escape its opponent's hold.

The minotaur kicked its feet to free itself but was having trouble moving. Its entire body was being hindered by the lock the knight had on its right hand behind its back.

The minotaur grabbed the knight's left hand in its own and tried ripping him off its neck but was unsuccessful.

The man had impossible strength for a human. His arms were as tough as bronze, and the minotaur could not move them.

Dammit.

Is this also some kind of trick?

In the brief moment we both took to activate our skills, I only focused on my sword, but did he prepare all these skills to be used in quick succession?

The minotaur tried its best to endure, but the knight's muscles were abnormally tough and resisted any attempt it made to free itself.

Eventually, a dull *crack* sounded, echoing throughout the room.

That was it.

Its neck was broken.

The strength of the minotaur's entire body vanished.

It was still barely alive, and had it been given just a little time, it probably could have used a regeneration skill to cure all its injuries. The knight did not give it that time.

Its head was likely to be cut off at any moment. This would be the minotaur's final battle. It had no regrets.

This human had proved he was an extraordinarily skilled fighter with his strength, skill with a sword, and barehanded technique.

The minotaur was grateful to have been able to experience such a battle.

It did not understand the language of man, so it did not know the name of the goddess who had given it her blessing or the contents of the promise she had made him. It understood fully, though, that its wish had been granted and that it never would have had this opportunity without having been given a second life.

The minotaur let out a long and deep groan.

It was a prayer of thanks from the minotaur to the earth goddess Bora as its life came to an end.

4

When Panzel heard the minotaur's neck break, he knew his gamble had paid off.

The moment he'd become aware that he would likely receive a royal order to take down the minotaur, he began preparing.

He'd requested the help of the guild leader and performed a

thorough investigation into the minotaur's history and capabilities, its body structure and characteristics, and more. After all that research, Panzel had decided the best strategy would be to use a barehanded fighting style.

The minotaur's skeletal structure, muscles, and joints were surprisingly similar to humans'. As a result, joint-locking techniques one wouldn't use on most monsters would prove surprisingly effective against the minotaur. He also figured the minotaur would not have much, if any, experience dealing with that kind of attack.

This minotaur had achieved mastery of the sword. Panzel wouldn't have lost in a sword fight, but given that the minotaur's body was incredibly thick, he had no idea how much damage it would actually take to kill it.

The minotaur also had the stamina to fight the metal dragon for days on end. He couldn't see a way to defeat his opponent in a sword fight and was also unlikely to outlast it.

For that reason, he'd broke the minotaur's sword, engaged it in hand-to-hand combat, then used a joint-locking technique to enable himself to break the beast's neck.

Fighting the minotaur without a weapon seemed like an absurd plan, but through this method, Panzel had seen his path to victory. One of the preeminent martial artists of the Jan'Majar Temple occasionally visited the Baldemost Kingdom on business, so Panzel had discreetly invited him to their estate and requested special training. Under his tutelage, Panzel learned techniques that allowed him to increase his strength exponentially in a very short period of time.

He also worked on his weapon-breaking skill while training under Logan.

Now he had succeeded in snapping the minotaur's neck.

It was still alive but was definitely on the verge of death. All he had to do was cut off the minotaur's head, and it would die. When he tried to draw a sword out of his Treasury, though, it happened.

He felt a sharp pain in his side.

The noble who had accompanied him as an observer had stabbed a dagger through a gap in his armor.

The searing pain from the stab wound told him the dagger must have been poisoned.

"Evert... Why?"

At that moment, the minotaur's body spasmed. Its regeneration skill had begun healing its damage.

The minotaur grabbed Evert's leg with surprising speed. He had just removed the dagger from Panzel's side and was attempting to step back when the minotaur slammed him face-first onto the stone floor.

As he slowly got to his feet, Panzel saw that Evert had been stabbed in the chest by the poisoned dagger.

"I'm sorry, Panzel." He remained on his knees without trying to run, as if he had accepted that he was going to die or perhaps as atonement for betraying his partner's trust. "It was a trap. From the beginning, all of it. Even the promise that you would be made Defender of the Realm if you defeated the minotaur."

"I understood that I was not expected to win," responded Panzel.

"Even still, you accepted the job. You had no choice but to accept it. Being named Defender of the Realm would have given you an influential voice with which to support your master during this difficult time. Refusal was not an option because it was a direct order from the king, but if you didn't want to do it, your master would not have consented."

"So I was supposed to die here. You were named the observer to stab me with the poisoned dagger on the small chance I actually won. Lord Evert, I never would have thought you were a dog for the Duke of Riga."

"Panzel, you're too good for this country. Your master is too good for this country. I can't say I'm comfortable with Riga's tyranny, but if the eldest prince ascends to the throne, the political purge of Riga's faction will be unavoidable. That will break the country. Our kingdom is currently too wealthy, too big. It will not hold if a significant portion of its nobles are forcibly removed."

"If the lords could reconcile their differences, none of that would need to happen."

"Even if the purge is carried out, the northern campaign would not end well. Surely you know the strength of the northern knights. It will only bring misery to the people. We can't allow the kingdom to go in that direction." Evert made a pained expression and continued. "At this moment, Riga's soldiers are heading for your lord's estate."

"I know, but even if it comes to battle, they won't lose. My lord has already assembled the troops. We outnumber Riga's army and would beat them on spirit alone. I'm sure you know that as well as anyone."

"I am certainly familiar with House Mercurius's wisdom and bravery. However, you'll find their bravery lacking at the moment."

"During the invasion of the southern barbarians, my lord distinguished himself as a great warrior. During the rebellion of House Shen, he rushed to the mausoleum and protected the royal graveyard from harm. He also led a small force to snuff out the bandits who were wreaking havoc on the highways. Can you really look at all that and say that he lacks bravery?"

"I won't deny any of that. But Mercurius's bravery comes from you. If you are with him, he is capable of showing valor equal to yours."

With you out of the picture, though, he will not find it. The previous chief vassal will rise from his bed and take command for a time, but that won't last long. Once his energy is spent, the battle will be over. Your lord will die. But the house will remain. If you and your lord die, the eldest prince will have to commit suicide. His Majesty will abdicate, and the second prince will ascend to the throne. Panzel, it appears my time is up... I'm sorry."

Evert died after he finished speaking, and his body disappeared.

Panzel kneeled in front of his dropped items and said a silent prayer.

Evert had come here knowing he would die, which meant no one would come to retrieve them. If Panzel wanted to leave the labyrinth, he had no choice but to ascend the one hundred floors on foot. He was unfamiliar with this labyrinth, so finding his way through its corridors while dealing with vicious monsters would be a struggle.

Panzel had spare weapons but no recovery items. He had water but no food. Such were the conditions for the hunt.

The effects of the poison were being suppressed by Panzel's powerful resistance, but it would eventually kill him. Even if he had not been poisoned, he would not have had the stamina to make it out of the labyrinth without food.

If he came across adventurers on the way up, he would be able to borrow potions and food from them. Right now, though, the harvest festival was in full swing. It was highly unlikely he would meet anyone else in the labyrinth. He had no way of reaching the entrance.

He had no hope of making it in time for the battle.

Despite all that, Panzel was confident in what he needed to do.

"Strange warrior. I must apologize to you. Something I need to do has arisen. I will return someday to resolve this."

The minotaur understood it had lost to this human. Had there been no interference, the knight would have severed its head from its neck.

It needed to give a reward to the victor.

The minotaur rose, reached into its Bag, and gave the human the best reward it could manage: a one-handed sword and one shortsword. It laid them down in front of the one who had bested it.

After some hesitation, Panzel picked up the two blades.

Had he been able to appraise the abilities of the swords then and there, he would have been astonished.

The one-handed sword was a drop from the minotaur's one hundredth victory against the metal dragon. It was called Bora's Sword.

This weapon was imbued with some incredible blessings.

Critical-Hit Rate up 20%
Movement Speed up 80%
Attack Speed up 80%
Health Leech up 10%
Mana Regen up 20%
Basic Stats up 60%
Automatic Damage Recovery

These blessings worked even outside of labyrinths. The sword was a treasure worthy of being called a divine weapon.

The shortsword was called Kaldan's Dagger and also had elite blessings that worked outside of labyrinths.

Removes all Status Ailments
Cures Poison
Grants Holy Element
Doubles Intellect
Grants Access to Floor Map

Panzel took the one-handed sword in his right hand and the shortsword in his left, bowed to the minotaur, and left the room.

5

Twenty-eight years passed.

The number of people visiting the minotaur increased for a time, then eventually decreased.

Now a new challenger was standing in front of the minotaur.

It was a young knight with black hair and black eyes. In his right hand, he held the one-handed sword the minotaur had given the man who'd beaten it twenty-eight years earlier.

In his left hand, he'd equipped a shield furnished with a powerful blessing.

The minotaur could not see it from where it was standing, but using its Search skill, it could sense the knight had that shortsword strapped to the inside of his shield and was wearing the bracelet from all those years ago on his left hand.

It could sense particularly strong blessings from the bracelet and the charm on his neck.

Above all, this knight had amazing skill and presence of mind.

The minotaur's body trembled with the anticipation of a worthy challenge.

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